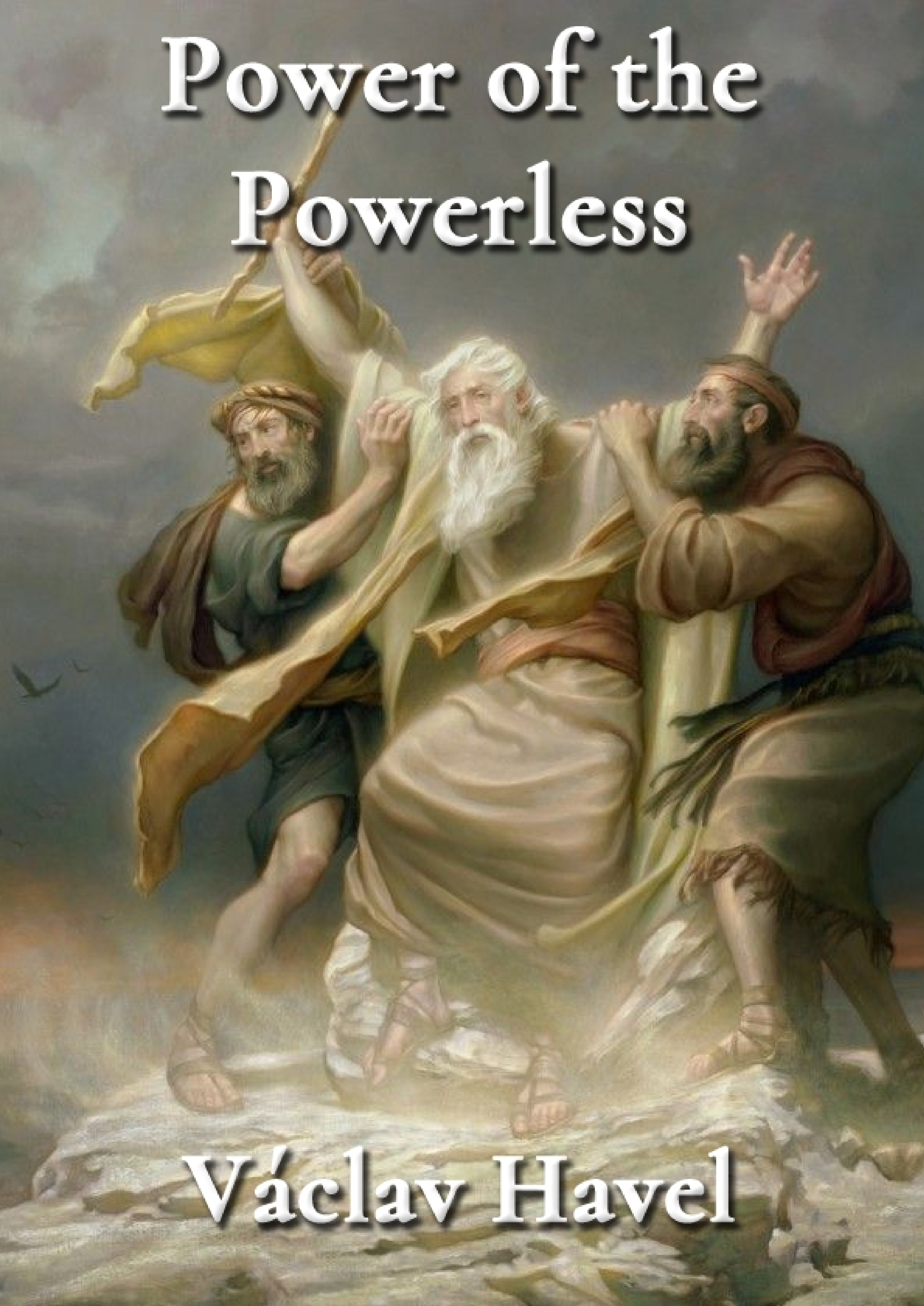
Power of the Powerless



Václav Havel

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I

A specter is haunting Eastern Europe: the specter of what in the West is called “dissent” This specter has not appeared out of thin air. It is a natural and inevitable consequence of the present historical phase of the system it is haunting. It was born at a time when this system, for a thousand reasons, can no longer base itself on the unadulterated, brutal, and arbitrary application of power, eliminating all expressions of nonconformity. What is more, the system has become so ossified politically that there is practically no way for such nonconformity to be implemented within its official structures.

Who are these so-called dissidents? Where does their point of view come from, and what. importance does it have? What is the significance of the “independent initiatives in which “dissidents collaborate, and what real chances do such initiatives have of success? Is it appropriate to refer to “dissidents as an opposition? If so, what exactly is such an opposition within the framework of this system? What does it do? What role does it play in society? What are its hopes and on what are they based? Is it within the power of the “dissidents—as a category of subcitizen outside the power establishment—to have any influence at all on society and the social system? Can they actually change anything?

I think that an examination of these questions-an examination of the potential of the “powerless-can only begin with an examination of the nature of power in the circumstances in which these powerless people operate.

II

Our system is most frequently characterized as a dictatorship or, more precisely, as the dictatorship of a political bureaucracy over a society which has undergone economic and social leveling. I am afraid that the term "dictatorship, regardless of how intelligible it may otherwise be, tends to obscure rather than clarify the real nature of power in this system. We usually associate the term with the notion of a small group of people who take over the government of a given country by force; their power is wielded openly, using the direct instruments of power at their disposal, and they are easily distinguished socially from the majority over whom they rule. One of the essential aspects of this traditional or classical notion of dictatorship is the assumption that it is temporary, ephemeral, lacking historical roots. Its existence seems to be bound up with the lives of those who established it. It is usually local in extent and significance, and regardless of the ideology it utilizes to grant itself legitimacy, its power derives ultimately from the numbers and the armed might of its soldiers and police. The principal threat to its existence is felt to be the possibility that someone better equipped in this sense might appear and overthrow it.

Even this very superficial overview should make it clear that the system in which we live has very little in common with a classical dictatorship. In the first place, our system is not limited in a local, geographical sense; rather, it holds sway over a huge power bloc controlled by one of the two superpowers. And although it quite naturally exhibits a number of local and historical variations, the range of these variations is fundamentally circumscribed by a single, unifying framework throughout the power bloc. Not only is the dictatorship everywhere based on the same principles and structured in the same way (that is, in the way evolved by the ruling super power), but each country has been completely penetrated by a network of manipulatory instruments controlled by the superpower

center and totally subordinated to its interests. In the stalemated world of nuclear parity, of course, that circumstance endows the system with an unprecedented degree of external stability compared with classical dictatorships. Many local crises which, in an isolated state, would lead to a change in the system, can be resolved through direct intervention by the armed forces of the rest of the bloc.

In the second place, if a feature of classical dictatorships is their lack of historical roots (frequently they appear to be no more than historical freaks, the fortuitous consequence of fortuitous social processes or of human and mob tendencies), the same cannot be said so facilely about our system. For even though our dictatorship has long since alienated itself completely from the social movements that give birth to it, the authenticity of these movements (and I am thinking of the proletarian and socialist movements of the nineteenth century) gives it undeniable historicity. These origins provided a solid foundation of sorts on which it could build until it became the utterly new social and political reality it is today, which has become so inextricably a part of the structure of the modern world. A feature of those historical origins was the "correct understanding of social conflicts in the period from which those original movements emerged. The fact that at the very core of this "correct understanding there was a genetic disposition toward the monstrous alienation characteristic of its subsequence development is not essential here. And in any case, this element also grew organically from the climate of that time and therefore can be said to have its origin there as well.

One legacy of that original "correct understanding is a third peculiarity that makes our systems different from other modern dictatorships: it commands an incomparably more precise, logically structured, generally comprehensible and, in essence, extremely flexible ideology that, in its elaborateness and completeness, is almost a secularized religion. It of fears a ready answer to any question whatsoever; it can scarcely be accepted only in part, and accepting it has profound implications for human life. In an era

when metaphysical and existential certainties are in a state of crisis, when people are being uprooted and alienated and are losing their sense of what this world means, this ideology inevitably has a certain hypnotic charm. To wandering humankind it offers an immediately available home: all one has to do is accept it, and suddenly everything becomes clear once more, life takes on new meaning, and all mysteries, unanswered questions, anxiety, and loneliness vanish. Of course, one pays dearly for this low-rent home: the price is abdication of one s own reason, conscience, and responsibility, for an essential aspect of this ideology is the consignment of reason and conscience to a higher authority. The principle involved here is that the center of power is identical with the center of truth. (In our case, the connection with Byzantine theocracy is direct: the highest secular authority is identical with the highest spiritual authority.) It is true of course that, all this aside, ideology no longer has any great influence on people, at least within our bloc (with the possible exception of Russia, where the serf mentality, with its blind, fatalistic respect for rulers and its automatic acceptance of all their claims, is still dominant and combined with a superpower patriotism which traditionally places the interests of empire higher than the interests of humanity). But this is not important, because ideology plays its role in our system very well (an issue to which I will return) precisely because it is what it is.

Fourth, the technique of exercising power in traditional dictatorships contains a necessary element of improvisation. The mechanisms for wielding power are for the most part not established firmly, and there is considerable room for accident and for the arbitrary and unregulated application of power. Socially, psychologically, and physically, conditions still exist for the expression of some form of opposition. In short, there are many seams on the surface which can split apart before the entire power structure has managed to stabilize. Our system, on the other hand, has been developing in the Soviet Union for over sixty years, and for approximately thirty years in Eastern Europe; moreover, several of its long-established structural features are derived from Czarist

absolutism. In terms of the physical aspects of power, this has led to the creation of such intricate and well-developed mechanisms for the direct and indirect manipulation of the entire population that, as a physical power base, it represents something radically new. At the same time, let us not forget that the system is made significantly more effective by state ownership and central direction of all the means of production. This gives the power structure an unprecedented and uncontrollable capacity to invest in itself (in the areas of the bureaucracy and the police, for example) and makes it easier for that structure, as the sole employer, to manipulate the day-to-day existence of all citizens.

Finally, if an atmosphere of revolutionary excitement, heroism, dedication, and boisterous violence on all sides characterizes classical dictatorships, then the last traces of such an atmosphere have vanished from the Soviet bloc. For, some time now this bloc has ceased to be a kind of enclave, isolated from the rest of the developed world and immune to processes occurring in it. To the contrary, the Soviet bloc is an integral part of that larger world, and it shares and shapes the worlds destiny. This means in concrete terms that the hierarchy of values existing in the developed countries of the West has, in essence, appeared in our society (the long period of co-existence with the West has only hastened this process)In other words, what we have here is simply another form of the consumer and industrial society, with all its concomitant social, intellectual, and psychological consequences. It is impossible to understand the nature of power in our system properly without taking this into account.

The profound difference between our system-in terms of the nature of power-and what we traditionally understand by dictatorship, a difference I hope is clear even from this quite superficial comparison, has caused me to search for some term appropriate for our system, purely for the purposes of this essay. If I refer to it henceforth as a *post-totalitarian system*, I am fully aware that this is perhaps not the most precise term, but I am unable to think of a

better one. I do not wish to imply by the prefix “poso that the system is no longer totalitarian; on the contrary, I mean that it is totalitarian in a way fundamentally different from classical dictatorships, different from totalitarianism as we usually understand it.

The circumstances I have mentioned, however, form only a circle of conditional factors and a kind of phenomenal framework for the actual composition of power in the post-totalitarian system, several aspects of which I shall now attempt to identify.

III

The manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: “Workers of the world, unite! Why does he do it? What is he trying to communicate to the world? Is he genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world? Is his enthusiasm so great that he feels an irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals? Has he really given more than a moments thought to how such a unification might occur and what it would mean?

I think it can safely be assumed that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it has been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because that is the way it has to be. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble. He could be reproached for not having the proper decoration in his window; someone might even accuse him of disloyalty. He does it because these things must be done if one is to get along in life. It is one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life “in harmony with society,” as they say.

Obviously the greengrocer is indifferent to the semantic content of the slogan on exhibit; he does not put the slogan in his window from any personal desire to acquaint the public with the ideal it expresses. This, of course, does not mean that his action has no motive or significance at all, or that the slogan communicates nothing to anyone. The slogan is really a *sign*, and as such it contains a subliminal but very definite message. Verbally, it might be expressed this way: “I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and

therefore I have the right to be left in peace." This message, of course, has an addressee: it is directed above, to the greengrocers superior, and at the same time it is a shield that protects the greengrocer from potential informers. The slogans. real meaning, therefore, is rooted firmly in the greengrocers existence. It reflects his vital interests. But what are those vital interests?

Let us take note: if the greengrocer had been instructed to display the slogan "I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient; he would not be nearly as indifferent to its semantics, even though the statement would reflect the truth. The greengrocer would be embarrassed and ashamed to put such an unequivocal statement of his own degradation in the shop window, and quite naturally so, for he is a human being and thus has a sense of his own dignity. To overcome this complication, his expression of loyalty must take the form of a sign which, at least on its textual surface, indicates a level of disinterested conviction. It must allow the greengrocer to say, "Whats wrong with the workers of the world uniting?" Thus the sign helps the greengrocer to conceal from himself the low foundations of his obedience, at the same time concealing the low foundations of power. It hides them behind the facade of something high. And that something is *ideology*.

Ideology is a specious way of relating to the world. It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to *part* with them. As the repository of something suprapersonal and objective, it enables people to deceive their conscience and conceal their true position and their inglorious *modus vivendi*, both from the world and from themselves. It is a very pragmatic but, at the same time, an apparently dignified way of legitimizing what is above, below, and on either side. It is directed toward people and toward God. It is a veil behind which human beings can hide their own fallen existence, their trivialization, and their adaptation to the status quo. It is an excuse that everyone can use, from the greengrocer, who conceals his fear of losing his job behind an alleged interest in the unification of the workers of the

world, to the highest functionary, whose interest in staying in power can be cloaked in phrases about service to the working class. The primary excusatory function of ideology, therefore, is to provide people, both as victims and pillars of the post-totalitarian system, with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe.

The smaller a dictatorship and the less stratified by modernization the society under it, the more directly the will of the dictator can be exercised- In other words, the dictator can employ more or less naked discipline, avoiding the complex processes of relating to the world and of self-justification which ideology involves. But the more complex the mechanisms of power become, the larger and more stratified the society they embrace, and the longer they have operated historically, the more individuals must be connected to them from outside, and the greater the importance attached to the ideological excuse. It acts as a kind of bridge between the regime and the people, across which the regime approaches the people and the people approach the regime. This explains why ideology plays such an important role in the post-totalitarian system: that complex machinery of units, hierarchies, transmission belts, and indirect instruments of manipulation which ensure in countless ways the integrity of the regime, leaving nothing to chance, would be quite simply unthinkable without ideology acting as its all-embracing excuse and as the excuse for each of its parts.

IV

Between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss: while life, in its essence, moves toward plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, and self organization, in short, toward the fulfillment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline. While life ever strives to create new and improbable structures, the post-totalitarian system contrives to force life into its most probable states. The aims of the system reveal its most essential characteristic to be introversion, a movement toward being ever more completely and unreservedly *itself*, which means that the radius of its influence is continually widening as well. This system serves people only to the extent necessary to ensure that people will serve it. Anything beyond this, that is to say, anything which leads people to overstep their predetermined roles is regarded by the system as an attack upon itself And in this respect it is correct: every instance of such transgression is a genuine denial of the system. It can be said, therefore, that the inner aim of the post-totalitarian system is not mere preservation of power in the hands of a ruling clique, as appears to be the case at first sight. Rather, the social phenomenon of self-preservation is subordinated to something higher, to a kind of blind *automatism* which drives the system. No matter what position individuals hold in the hierarchy of power, they are not considered by the system to be worth anything in themselves, but only as things intended to fuel and serve this automatism. For this reason, an individuals desire for power is admissible only in so far as its direction coincides with the direction of the automatism of the system.

Ideology, in creating a bridge of excuses between the system and the individual, spans the abyss between the aims of the system and the aims of life. It pretends that the requirements of the system derive

from the requirements of life. It is a world of appearances trying to pass for reality.

The post-totalitarian system touches people at every step, but it does so with its ideological gloves on. This is why life in the system is so thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies: government by bureaucracy is called popular government; the working class is enslaved in the name of the working class; the complete degradation of the individual is presented as his ultimate liberation; depriving people of in formation is called making it available; the use of power to manipulate is called the public control of power, and the arbitrary abuse of power is called observing the legal code; the repression of culture is called its development; the expansion of imperial influence is presented as support for the oppressed; the lack of free expression becomes the highest form of freedom; farcical elections become the highest form of democracy; banning independent thought becomes the most scientific of world views; military occupation becomes fraternal assistance. Because the regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics. It pretends not to possess an omnipotent and unprincipled police apparatus. It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to pretend nothing.

Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them. For this reason, however, they must *live within a lie*. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, *are* the system.

V

We have seen that the real meaning of the greengrocers slogan has nothing to do with what the text of the slogan actually says. Even so, this real meaning is quite clear and generally comprehensible because the code is so familiar: the greengrocer declares his loyalty (and he can do no other if his declaration is to be accepted) in the only way the regime is capable of hearing; that is, by accepting the prescribed *ritual*, by accepting appearances as reality, by accepting the given rules of the game. In doing so, however, he has himself become a player in the game, thus making it possible for the game to go on, for it to exist in the first place.

If ideology was originally a bridge between the system and the individual as an individual, then the moment he steps on to this bridge it becomes at the same time a bridge between the system and the individual as a component of the system. That is, if ideology originally facilitated (by acting outwardly) the constitution of power by serving as a psychological excuse, then from the moment that excuse is accepted, it constitutes power inwardly, becoming an active component of that power. It begins to function as the principal instrument of ritual communication *within* the system of power.

The whole power structure (and we have already discussed its physical articulation) could not exist at all if there were not a certain metaphysical order binding all its components together, interconnecting them and subordinating them to a uniform method of accountability, supplying the combined operation of all these components with rules of the game, that is, with certain regulations, limitations, and legalities. This metaphysical order is fundamental to, and standard throughout, the entire power structure; it integrates its communication system and makes possible the internal exchange and transfer of information and instructions. It is rather like a collection of traffic signals and directional signs, giving the process

shape and structure. This metaphysical order guarantees the inner coherence of the totalitarian power structure. It is the glue holding it together, its binding principle, the instrument of its discipline. Without this glue the structure as a totalitarian structure would vanish; it would disintegrate into individual atoms chaotically colliding with one another in their unregulated particular interests and inclinations. The entire pyramid of totalitarian power, deprived of the element that binds it together, would collapse in upon itself, as it were, in a kind of material implosion.

As the interpretation of reality by the power structure, ideology is always subordinated ultimately to the interests of the structure. Therefore, it has a natural tendency to disengage itself from reality, to create a world of appearances, to become ritual. In societies where there is public competition for power and therefore public control of that power, there also exists quite naturally public control of the way that power legitimates itself ideologically. Consequently, in such conditions there are always certain correctives that effectively prevent ideology from abandoning reality altogether. Under totalitarianism, however, these correctives disappear, and thus there is nothing to prevent ideology from becoming more and more removed from reality, gradually turning into what it has already become in the post-totalitarian system: a world of appearances, a mere ritual, a formalized language deprived of semantic contact with reality and transformed into a system of ritual signs that replace reality with pseudo-reality.

Yet, as we have seen, ideology becomes at the same time an increasingly important component of power, a pillar providing it with both excusatory legitimacy and an inner coherence. As this aspect grows n importance, and as it gradually loses touch with reality, it acquires a peculiar but very real strength. It becomes reality itself, albeit a reality altogether self-contained, one that on certain levels (chiefly inside the power structure) may have even greater weight than reality as such. Increasingly, the virtuosity of the ritual becomes more important than the reality hidden behind it.

The significance of phenomena no longer derives from the phenomena themselves, but from their locus as concepts in the ideological context. Reality does not shape theory, but rather the reverse. Thus power gradually draws closer to ideology than it does to reality; it draws its strength from theory and becomes entirely dependent on it. This inevitably leads, of course, to a paradoxical result: rather than theory, or rather ideology, serving power, power begins to serve ideology. It is as though ideology had appropriated power from power, as though it had become dictator itself. It then appears that theory itself, ritual itself, ideology itself, makes decisions that affect people, and not the other way around.

If ideology is the principal guarantee of the inner consistency of power, it becomes at the same time an increasingly important guarantee of its *continuity*. Whereas succession to power in classical dictatorship is always a rather complicated affair (the pretenders having nothing to give their claims reasonable legitimacy, thereby forcing them always to resort to confrontations of naked power), in the post-totalitarian system power is passed on from person to person, from clique to clique, and from generation to generation in an essentially more regular fashion. In the selection of pretenders, a new "king-maker" takes part: it is ritual legitimation, the ability to rely on ritual, to fulfill it and use it, to allow oneself, as it were, to be borne aloft by it. Naturally, power struggles exist in the post-totalitarian system as well, and most of them are far more brutal than in an open society, for the struggle is not open, regulated by democratic rules, and subject to public control, but hidden behind the scenes. (It is difficult to recall a single instance in which the First Secretary of a ruling Communist Party has been replaced without the various military and security forces being placed at least on alert.) This struggle, however, can never (as it can in classical dictatorships) threaten the very essence of the system and its continuity. At most it will shake up the power structure, which will recover quickly precisely because the binding substance-ideology remains undisturbed. No matter who is replaced by whom, succession is only possible against the backdrop and within the

framework of a common ritual. It can never take place by denying that ritual.

Because of this dictatorship of the ritual, however, power becomes clearly *anonymous*. Individuals are almost dissolved in the ritual. They allow themselves to be swept along by it and frequently it seems as though ritual alone carries people from obscurity into the light of power. Is it not characteristic of the post-totalitarian system that, on all levels of the power hierarchy, individuals are increasingly being pushed aside by faceless people, puppets, those uniformed flunkeys of the rituals and routines of power?

The automatic operation of a power structure thus dehumanized and made anonymous is a feature of the fundamental automatism of this system. It would seem that it is precisely the *diktats* of this automatism which select people lacking individual will for the power structure, that it is precisely the *diktat* of the empty phrase which summons to power people who use empty phrases as the best guarantee that the automatism of the post-totalitarian system will continue.

Western Sovietologists often exaggerate the role of individuals in the post-totalitarian system and overlook the fact that the ruling figures, despite the immense power they possess through the centralized structure of power, are often no more than blind executors of the systems own internal laws-laws they themselves never can, and never do, reflect upon. In any case, experience has taught us again and again that this automatism is far more powerful than the will of any individual; and should someone possess a more independent will, he must conceal it behind a ritually anonymous mask in order to have an opportunity to enter the power hierarchy at all. And when the individual finally gains a place there and tries to make his will felt within it, that automatism, with its enormous inertia, will triumph sooner or later, and either the individual will be ejected by the power structure like a foreign organism, or he will be compelled to resign his individuality gradually, once again blending with the automatism and becoming its servant, almost

indistinguishable from those who preceded him and those who will follow. (Let us recall, for instance, the development of Husk or Gomukka.) The necessity of continually hiding behind and relating to ritual means that even the more enlightened members of the power structure are often obsessed with ideology. They are never able to plunge straight to the bottom of naked reality, and they always confuse it, in the final analysis, with ideological pseudoreality. (In my opinion, one of the reasons the Dubcek leadership lost control of the situation in 1968 was precisely because, in extreme situations and in final questions, its members were never capable of extricating themselves completely from the world of appearances.)

It can be said, therefore, that ideology, as that instrument of internal communication which assures the power structure of inner cohesion is, in the post-totalitarian system, some thing that transcends the physical aspects of power, something that dominates it to a considerable degree and, therefore, tends to assure its continuity as well. It is one of the pillars of the systems external stability. This pillar, however, is built on a very unstable foundation. It is built on lies. It works only as long as people are willing to live within the lie.

VI

Why in fact did our greengrocer have to put his loyalty on display in the shop window? Had he not already displayed it sufficiently in various internal or semi-public ways? At trade-union meetings, after all, he had always voted as he should. He had always taken part in various competitions. He voted in elections like a good citizen. He had even signed the 'anti-Charter'. Why, on top of all that, should he have to declare his loyalty publicly? After all, the people who walk past his window will certainly not stop to read that, in the greengrocer's opinion, the workers of the world ought to unite. The fact of the matter is, they don't read the slogan at all, and it can be fairly assumed they don't even see it. If you were to ask a woman who had stopped in front of his shop what she saw in the window, she could certainly tell you whether or not they had tomatoes today, but it is highly unlikely that she noticed the slogan at all, let alone what it said.

It seems senseless to require the greengrocer to declare his loyalty publicly. But it makes sense nevertheless. People ignore his slogan, but they do so because such slogans are also found in other shop windows, on lamp posts, bulletin boards, in apartment windows, and on buildings; they are everywhere, in fact. They form part of the panorama of everyday life. Of course, while they ignore the details, people are very aware of that panorama as a whole. And what else is the greengrocer's slogan but a small component in that huge backdrop to daily life?

The greengrocer had to put the slogan in his window, therefore, not in the hope that someone might read it or be persuaded by it, but to contribute, along with thousands of other slogans, to the panorama that everyone is very much aware of. This panorama, of course, has a subliminal meaning as well: it reminds people where they are living and what is expected of them. It tells them what everyone else is doing, and indicates to them what they must do as well, if they don't

want to be excluded, to fall into isolation, alienate themselves from society, break the rules of the game, and risk the loss of their peace and tranquillity and security.

he woman who ignored the greengrocer's slogan may well have hung a similar slogan just an hour before in the corridor of the office where she works. She did it more or less without thinking, just as our greengrocer did, and she could do so precisely because she was doing it against the background of the general panorama and with some awareness of it, that is, against the background of the panorama of which the greengrocer's shop window forms a part. When the greengrocer visits her office, he will not notice her slogan either, just as she failed to notice his. Nevertheless their slogans are mutually dependent: both were displayed with some awareness of the general panorama and, we might say, under its *diktat*. Both, however, assist in the creation of that panorama, and therefore they assist in the creation of that *diktat* as well. The greengrocer and the office worker have both adapted to the conditions in which they live, but in doing so, they help to create those conditions. They do what is done, what is to be done, what must be done, but at the same time – by that very token – they confirm that it must be done in fact. They conform to a particular requirement and in so doing they themselves perpetuate that requirement. Metaphorically speaking, without the greengrocer's slogan the office worker's slogan could not exist, and vice versa. Each proposes to the other that something be repeated and each accepts the other's proposal. Their mutual indifference to each other's slogans is only an illusion: in reality, by exhibiting their slogans, each compels the other to accept the rules of the game and to confirm thereby the power that requires the slogans in the first place. Quite simply, each helps the other to be obedient. Both are objects in a system of control, but at the same time they are its subjects as well. They are both victims of the system and its instruments.

If an entire district town is plastered with slogans that no one reads, it is on the one hand a message from the district secretary to the

regional secretary, but it is also something more: a small example of the principle of social *auto-totality* at work. Part of the essence of the post-totalitarian system is that it draws everyone into its sphere of power, not so they may realize themselves as human beings, but so they may surrender their human identity in favour of the identity of the system, that is, so they may become agents of the system's general automatism and servants of its self-determined goals, so they may participate in the common responsibility for it, so they may be pulled into and ensnared by it, like Faust with Mephistopheles. More than this: so they may create through their involvement a general norm and, thus, bring pressure to bear on their fellow citizens. And further: so they may learn to be comfortable with their involvement, to identify with it as though it were something natural and inevitable and, ultimately, so they may – with no external urging – come to treat any non-involvement as an abnormality, as arrogance, as an attack on themselves, as a form of dropping out of society. By pulling everyone into its power structure, the post-totalitarian system makes everyone instruments of a mutual totality, the auto-totality of society.

Everyone, however, is in fact involved and enslaved, not only the greengrocers but also the prime ministers. Differing positions in the hierarchy merely establish differing degrees of involvement: the greengrocer is involved only to a minor extent, but he also has very little power. The prime minister, naturally, has greater power, but in return he is far more deeply involved. Both, however, are unfree, each merely in a somewhat different way. The real accomplice in this involvement, therefore, is not another person, but the system itself. Position in the power hierarchy determines the degree of responsibility and guilt, but it gives no one unlimited responsibility and guilt, nor does it completely absolve anyone. Thus the conflict between the aims of life and the aims of the system is not a conflict between two socially defined and separate communities; and only a very generalized view (and even that only approximative) permits us to divide society into the rulers and the ruled. Here, by the way, is one of the most important differences between the post-totalitarian

system and classical dictatorships, in which this line of conflict can still be drawn according to social class. In the post-totalitarian system, this line runs de facto through each person, for everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system. What we understand by the system is not, therefore, a social order imposed by one group upon another, but rather something which permeates the entire society and is a factor in shaping it, something which may seem impossible to grasp or define (for it is in the nature of a mere principle), but which is expressed by the entire society as an important feature of its life.

The fact that human beings have created, and daily create, this self-directed system through which they divest themselves of their innermost identity, is not therefore the result of some incomprehensible misunderstanding of history, nor is it history somehow gone off its rails. Neither is it the product of some diabolical higher will which has decided, for reasons unknown, to torment a portion of humanity in this way. It can happen and did happen only because there is obviously in modern humanity a certain tendency towards the creation, or at least the toleration, of such a system. There is obviously something in human beings which responds to this system, something they reflect and accommodate, something within them which paralyses every effort of their better selves to revolt. Human beings are compelled to live within a lie, but they can be compelled to do so only because they are in fact capable of living in this way. Therefore not only does the system alienate humanity, but at the same time alienated humanity supports this system as its own involuntary masterplan, as a degenerate image of its own degeneration, as a record of people's own failure as individuals.

The essential aims of life are present naturally in every person. In everyone there is some longing for humanity's rightful dignity, for moral integrity, for free expression of being and a sense of transcendence over the world of existences. Yet, at the same time, each person is capable, to a greater or lesser degree, of coming to

terms with living within the lie. Each person somehow succumbs to a profane trivialization of his or her inherent humanity, and to utilitarianism. In everyone there is some willingness to merge with the anonymous crowd and to flow comfortably along with it down the river of pseudo-life. This is much more than a simple conflict between two identities. It is something far worse: it is a challenge to the very notion of identity itself.

In highly simplified terms, it could be said that the post-totalitarian system has been built on foundations laid by the historical encounter between dictatorship and the consumer society. Is it not true that the far-reaching adaptability to living a lie and the effortless spread of social auto-totality have some connection with the general unwillingness of consumption-oriented people to sacrifice some material certainties for the sake of their own spiritual and moral integrity? With their willingness to surrender higher values when faced with the trivializing temptations of modern civilization? With their vulnerability to the attractions of mass indifference? And in the end, is not the greyness and the emptiness of life in the post-totalitarian system only an inflated caricature of modern life in general? And do we not in fact stand (although in the external measures of civilization, we are far behind) as a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies?

VII

Let us now imagine that one day something in our greengrocer snaps and he stops putting up the slogans merely to ingratiate himself. He stops voting in elections he knows are a farce. He begins to say what he really thinks at political meetings. And he even finds the strength in himself to express solidarity with those whom his conscience commands him to support. In this revolt the greengrocer steps out of living within the lie. He rejects the ritual and breaks the rules of the game. He discovers once more his suppressed identity and dignity. He gives his freedom a concrete significance. His revolt is an attempt to *live within the truth*.

The bill is not long in coming. He will be relieved of his post as manager of the shop and transferred to the warehouse. His pay will be reduced. His hopes for a holiday in Bulgaria will evaporate. His children's access to higher education will be threatened. His superiors will harass him and his fellow workers will wonder about him. Most of those who apply these sanctions, however, will not do so from any authentic inner conviction but simply under pressure from conditions, the same conditions that once pressured the greengrocer to display the official slogans. They will persecute the greengrocer either because it is expected of them, or to demonstrate their loyalty, or simply as part of the general panorama, to which belongs an awareness that this is how situations of this sort are dealt with, that this, in fact, is how things are always done, particularly if one is not to become suspect oneself. The executors, therefore, behave essentially like everyone else, to a greater or lesser degree: as components of the post-totalitarian system, as agents of its automatism, as petty instruments of the social auto-totality.

Thus the power structure, through the agency of those who carry out the sanctions, those anonymous components of the system, will spew the greengrocer from its mouth. The system, through its alienating presence in people, will punish him for his rebellion. It

must do so because the logic of its automatism and self-defence dictate it. The greengrocer has not committed a simple, individual offence, isolated in its own uniqueness, but something incomparably more serious. By breaking the rules of the game, he has disrupted the game as such. He has exposed it as a mere game. He has shattered the world of appearances, the fundamental pillar of the system. He has upset the power structure by tearing apart what holds it together. He has demonstrated that living a lie is living a lie. He has broken through the exalted façade of the system and exposed the real, base foundations of power. He has said that the emperor is naked. And because the emperor is in fact naked, something extremely dangerous has happened: by his action, the greengrocer has addressed the world. He has enabled everyone to peer behind the curtain. He has shown everyone that it is possible to live within the truth. Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal. The principle must embrace and permeate everything. There are no terms whatsoever on which it can coexist with living within the truth, and therefore everyone who steps out of line *denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety*.

This is understandable: as long as appearance is not confronted with reality, it does not seem to be appearance. As long as living a lie is not confronted with living the truth, the perspective needed to expose its mendacity is lacking. As soon as the alternative appears, however, it threatens the very existence of appearance and living a lie in terms of what they are, both their essence and their all-inclusiveness. And at the same time, it is utterly unimportant how large a space this alternative occupies: its power does not consist in its physical attributes but in the light it casts on those pillars of the system and on its unstable foundations. After all, the greengrocer was a threat to the system not because of any physical or actual power he had, but because his action went beyond itself, because it illuminated its surroundings and, of course, because of the incalculable consequences of that illumination. In the post-totalitarian system, therefore, living within the truth has more than a mere existential dimension (returning humanity to its inherent

nature), or a noetic dimension (revealing reality as it is), or a moral dimension (setting an example for others). It also has an unambiguous *political* dimension. If the main pillar of the system is living a lie, then it is not surprising that the fundamental threat to it is living the truth. This is why it must be suppressed more severely than anything else.

In the post-totalitarian system, truth in the widest sense of the word has a very special import, one unknown in other contexts. In this system, truth plays a far greater (and above all, a far different) role as a factor of power, or as an outright political force. How does the power of truth operate? How does truth as a factor of power work? How can its power – as power – be realized?

VIII

Individuals can be alienated from themselves only because there is *something* in them to alienate. The terrain of this violation is their authentic existence. Living the truth is thus woven directly into the texture of living a lie. It is the repressed alternative, the authentic aim to which living a lie is an inauthentic response. Only against this background does living a lie make any sense: it exists because of that background. In its excusatory, chimerical rootedness in the human order, it is a response to nothing other than the human predisposition to truth. Under the orderly surface of the life of lies, therefore, there slumbers the hidden sphere of life in its real aims, of its hidden openness to truth.

The singular, explosive, incalculable political power of living within the truth resides in the fact that living openly within the truth has an ally, invisible to be sure, but omnipresent: this hidden sphere. It is from this sphere that life lived openly in the truth grows; it is to this sphere that it speaks, and in it that it finds understanding. This is where the potential for communication exists. But this place is hidden and therefore, from the perspective of power, very dangerous. The complex ferment that takes place within it goes on in semi-darkness, and by the time it finally surfaces into the light of day as an assortment of shocking surprises to the system, it is usually too late to cover them up in the usual fashion. Thus they create a situation in which the regime is confounded, invariably causing panic and driving it to react in inappropriate ways.

It seems that the primary breeding ground for what might, in the widest possible sense of the word, be understood as an opposition in the post-totalitarian system is living within the truth. The confrontation between these opposition forces and the powers that be, of course, will obviously take a form essentially different from that typical of an open society or a classical dictatorship. Initially, this confrontation does not take place on the level of real,

institutionalized, quantifiable power which relies on the various instruments of power, but on a different level altogether: the level of human consciousness and conscience, the existential level. The effective range of this special power cannot be measured in terms of disciples, voters, or soldiers, because it lies spread out in the fifth column of social consciousness, in the hidden aims of life, in human beings' repressed longing for dignity and fundamental rights, for the realization of their real social and political interests. Its power, therefore, does not reside in the strength of definable political or social groups, but chiefly in the strength of a potential, which is hidden throughout the whole of society, including the official power structures of that society. Therefore this power does not rely on soldiers of its own, but on the soldiers of the enemy as it were – that is to say, on everyone who is living within the lie and who may be struck at any moment (in theory, at least) by the force of truth (or who, out of an instinctive desire to protect their position, may at least adapt to that force). It is a bacteriological weapon, so to speak, utilized when conditions are ripe by a single civilian to disarm an entire division. This power does not participate in any direct struggle for power; rather it makes its influence felt in the obscure arena of being itself. The hidden movements it gives rise to there, however, can issue forth (when, where, under what circumstances, and to what extent are difficult to predict) in something visible: a real political act or event, a social movement, a sudden explosion of civil unrest, a sharp conflict inside an apparently monolithic power structure, or simply an irrepressible transformation in the social and intellectual climate. And since all genuine problems and matters of critical importance are hidden beneath a thick crust of lies, it is never quite clear when the proverbial last straw will fall, or what that straw will be. This, too, is why the regime prosecutes, almost as a reflex action preventively, even the most modest attempts to live within the truth.

Why was Solzhenitsyn driven out of his own country? Certainly not because he represented a unit of real power, that is, not because any of the regime's representatives felt he might unseat them and take

their place in government. Solzhenitsyn's expulsion was something else: a desperate attempt to plug up the dreadful wellspring of truth, a truth which might cause incalculable transformations in social consciousness, which in turn might one day produce political debacles unpredictable in their consequences. And so the post-totalitarian system behaved in a characteristic way: it defended the integrity of the world of appearances in order to defend itself. For the crust presented by the life of lies is made of strange stuff. As long as it seals off hermetically the entire society, it appears to be made of stone. But the moment someone breaks through in one place, when one person cries out, 'The emperor is naked!' – when a single person breaks the rules of the game, thus exposing it as a game – everything suddenly appears in another light and the whole crust seems then to be made of a tissue on the point of tearing and disintegrating uncontrollably.

When I speak of living within the truth, I naturally do not have in mind only products of conceptual thought, such as a protest or a letter written by a group of intellectuals. It can be any means by which a person or a group revolts against manipulation: anything from a letter by intellectuals to a workers' strike, from a rock concert to a student demonstration, from refusing to vote in the farcical elections, to making an open speech at some official congress, or even a hunger strike, for instance. If the suppression of the aims of life is a complex process, and if it is based on the multifaceted manipulation of all expressions of life then, by the same token, every free expression of life indirectly threatens the post-totalitarian system politically, including forms of expression to which, in other social systems, no one would attribute any potential political significance, not to mention explosive power.

The Prague Spring is usually understood as a clash between two groups on the level of real power: those who wanted to maintain the system as it was and those who wanted to reform it. It is frequently forgotten, however, that this encounter was merely the final act and the inevitable consequence of a long drama originally played out

chiefly in the theatre of the spirit and the conscience of society. And that somewhere at the beginning of this drama, there were individuals who were willing to live within the truth, even when things were at their worst. These people had no access to real power, nor did they aspire to it. The sphere in which they were living the truth was not necessarily even that of political thought. They could equally have been poets, painters, musicians, or simply ordinary citizens who were able to maintain their human dignity. Today it is naturally difficult to pinpoint when and through which hidden, winding channel a certain action or attitude influenced a given milieu, and to trace the virus of truth as it slowly spread through the tissue of the life of lies, gradually causing it to disintegrate. One thing, however, seems clear: the attempt at political reform was not the cause of society's reawakening, but rather the final outcome of that reawakening.

I think the present also can be better understood in the light of this experience. The confrontation between 1000 Chartists and the post-totalitarian system would appear to be politically hopeless. This is true, of course, if we look at it through the traditional lens of the open political system, in which, quite naturally, every political force is measured chiefly in terms of the positions it holds on the level of real power. Given that perspective, a mini-party like the Charter would certainly not stand a chance. If, however, this confrontation is seen against the background of what we know about power in the post-totalitarian system, it appears in a fundamentally different light. For the time being, it is impossible to say with any precision what impact the appearance of Charter 77, its existence, and its work has had in the hidden sphere, and how the Charter's attempt to rekindle civic self-awareness and confidence is regarded there. Whether, when, and how this investment will eventually produce dividends in the form of specific political changes is even less possible to predict. But that, of course, is all part of living within the truth. As an existential solution, it takes individuals back to the solid ground of their own identity; as politics it throws them into a game of chance where the stakes are all or nothing. For this reason it is

undertaken only by those for whom the former is worth risking the latter, or who have come to the conclusion that there is no other way to conduct real politics in Czechoslovakia today. Which, by the way, is the same thing: this conclusion can be reached only by someone who is unwilling to sacrifice his or her own human identity to politics, or rather who does not believe in a politics that requires such a sacrifice.

The more thoroughly the post-totalitarian system frustrates any rival alternative on the level of real power, as well as any form of politics independent of the laws of its own automatism, the more definitively the centre of gravity of any potential political threat shifts to the area of the existential and the pre-political: usually without any conscious effort, living within the truth becomes the one natural point of departure for all activities that work against the automatism of the system. And even if such activities ultimately grow beyond the area of living within the truth (which means they are transformed into various parallel structures, movements, institutions, they begin to be regarded as political activity, they bring real pressure to bear on the official structures and begin in fact to have a certain influence on the level of real power), they always carry with them the specific hallmark of their origins. Therefore it seems to me that not even the so-called dissident movements can be properly understood without constantly bearing in mind this special background from which they emerge.

IX

The profound crisis of human identity brought on by living within a lie, a crisis which in turn makes such a life possible, certainly possesses a moral dimension as well; it appears, among other things, as *a deep moral crisis in society*. A person who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his or her own personal survival, is a *demoralized* person. The system depends on this demoralization, deepens it, is in fact a projection of it into society.

Living within the truth, as humanity's revolt against an enforced position, is, on the contrary, an attempt to regain control over one's own sense of responsibility. In other words, it is clearly a moral act, not only because one must pay so dearly for it, but principally because it is not self-serving: the risk may bring rewards in the form of a general amelioration in the situation, or it may not. In this regard, as I stated previously, it is an all-or-nothing gamble, and it is difficult to imagine a reasonable person embarking on such a course merely because he or she reckons that sacrifice today will bring rewards tomorrow, be it only in the form of general gratitude. (By the way, the representatives of power invariably come to terms with those who live within the truth by persistently ascribing utilitarian motivations to them – a lust for power or fame or wealth – and thus they try, at least, to implicate them in their own world, the world of general demoralization.)

If living within the truth in the post-totalitarian system becomes the chief breeding ground for independent, alternative political ideas, then all considerations about the nature and future prospects of these ideas must necessarily reflect this moral dimension as a political phenomenon. (And if the revolutionary Marxist belief about morality as a product of the 'superstructure' inhibits any of our

friends from realizing the full significance of this dimension and, in one way or another, from including it in their view of the world, it is to their own detriment: an anxious fidelity to the postu-lates of that world view prevents them from properly understanding the mechanisms of their own political influence, thus paradoxically making them precisely what they, as Marxists, so often suspect others of being – victims of 'false consciousness'.) The very special political significance of morality in the post-totalitarian system is a phenomenon that is at the very least unusual in modern political history, a phenomenon that might well have – as I shall soon attempt to show – far-reaching consequences.

X

Undeniably, the most important political event in Czechoslovakia after the advent of the Husák leadership in 1969 was the appearance of Charter 77. The spiritual and intellectual climate surrounding its appearance, however, was not the product of any immediate political event. That climate was created by the trial of some young musicians associated with a rock group called 'The Plastic People of the Universe'. Their trial was not a confrontation of two differing political forces or conceptions, but two differing conceptions of life. On the one hand, there was the sterile puritanism of the post-totalitarian establishment and, on the other hand, unknown young people who wanted no more than to be able to live within the truth, to play the music they enjoyed, to sing songs that were relevant to their lives, and to live freely in dignity and partnership. These people had no past history of political activity. They were not highly motivated members of the opposition with political ambitions, nor were they former politicians expelled from the power structures. They had been given every opportunity to adapt to the status quo, to accept the principles of living within a lie and thus to enjoy life undisturbed by the authorities. Yet they decided on a different course. Despite this, or perhaps precisely because of it, their case had a very special impact on everyone who had not yet given up hope. Moreover, when the trial took place, a new mood had begun to surface after the years of waiting, of apathy and of scepticism towards various forms of resistance. People were 'tired of being tired'; they were fed up with the stagnation, the inactivity, barely hanging on in the hope that things might improve after all. In some ways the trial was the final straw. Many groups of differing tendencies which until then had remained isolated from each other, reluctant to co-operate, or which were committed to forms of action that made co-operation difficult, were suddenly struck with the powerful realization that freedom is indivisible. Everyone understood that an attack on the Czech musical underground was

an attack on a most elementary and important thing, something that in fact bound everyone together: it was an attack on the very notion of ‘living within the truth’, on the real aims of life. The freedom to play rock music was understood as a human freedom and thus as essentially the same as the freedom to engage in philosophical and political reflection, the freedom to write, the freedom to express and defend the various social and political interests of society. People were inspired to feel a genuine sense of solidarity with the young musicians and they came to realize that not standing up for the freedom of others, regardless of how remote their means of creativity or their attitude to life, meant surrendering one’s own freedom. (There is no freedom without equality before the law, and there is no equality before the law without freedom; Charter 77 has given this ancient notion a new and characteristic dimension, which has immensely important implications for modern Czech history. What Slábeček, the author of the book *Sixty-eight*, in a brilliant analysis, calls the ‘principle of exclusion’, lies at the root of all our present-day moral and political misery. This principle was born at the end of the Second World War in that strange collusion of democrats and communists and was subsequently developed further and further, right to the ‘bitter end’. For the first time in decades this principle has been overcome, by Charter 77: all those united in the Charter have, for the first time, become equal partners. Charter 77 is not merely a coalition of communists and non-communists – that would be nothing historically new and, from the moral and political point of view, nothing revolutionary – but it is a community that is *a priori* open to anyone, and no one in it is *a priori* assigned an inferior position.) This was the climate, then, in which Charter 77 was created. Who could have foreseen that the prosecution of one or two obscure rock groups would have such far-reaching consequences?

I think that the origins of Charter 77 illustrate very well what I have already suggested above: that in the post-totalitarian system, the real background to the movements that gradually assume political significance does not usually consist of overtly political events of

confrontations between different forces or concepts that are openly political. These movements for the most part originate elsewhere, in the far broader area of the 'pre-political', where 'living within a lie' confronts 'living within the truth', that is, where the demands of the post-totalitarian system conflict with the real aims of life. These real aims can naturally assume a great many forms. Sometimes they appear as the basic material or social interests of a group or an individual; at other times, they may appear as certain intellectual and spiritual interests; at still other times, they may be the most fundamental of existential demands, such as the simple longing of people to live their own lives in dignity. Such a conflict acquires a political character, then, not because of the elementary political nature of the aims demanding to be heard but simply because, given the complex system of manipulation on which the post-totalitarian system is founded and on which it is also dependent, every free human act or expression, every attempt to live within the truth, must necessarily appear as a threat to the system and, thus, as something which is political *par excellence*. Any eventual political articulation of the movements that grow out of this 'pre-political' hinterland is secondary. It develops and matures as a result of a subsequent confrontation with the system, and not because it started off as a political programme, project or impulse.

Once again, the events of 1968 confirm this. The communist politicians who were trying to reform the system came forward with their programme not because they had suddenly experienced a mystical enlightenment, but because they were led to do so by continued and increasing pressure from areas of life that had nothing to do with politics in the traditional sense of the word. In fact they were trying in political ways to solve the social conflicts (which in fact were confrontations between the aims of the system and the aims of life) that almost every level of society had been experiencing daily, and had been thinking about with increasing openness for years. Backed by this living resonance throughout society, scholars and artists had defined the problem in a wide variety of ways and students were demanding solutions.

The genesis of Charter 77 also illustrates the special political significance of the moral aspect of things that I have mentioned. Charter 77 would have been unimaginable without that powerful sense of solidarity among widely differing groups, and without the sudden realization that it was impossible to go on waiting any longer, and that the truth had to be spoken loudly and collectively, regardless of the virtual certainty of sanctions and the uncertainty of any tangible results in the immediate future. 'There are some things worth suffering for,' Jan Patocka wrote shortly before his death. I think that Chartists understand this not only as Patocka's legacy, but also as the best explanation of why they do what they do.

Seen from the outside, and chiefly from the vantage point of the system and its power structure, Charter 77 came as a surprise, as a bolt out of the blue. It was not a bolt out of the blue, of course, but that impression is understandable, since the ferment that led to it took place in the 'hidden sphere', in that semi-darkness where things are difficult to chart or analyse. The chances of predicting the appearance of the Charter were just as slight as the chances are now of predicting where it will lead. Once again, it was that shock, so typical of moments when something from the hidden sphere suddenly bursts through the moribund surface of 'living within a lie'. The more one is trapped in the world of appearances, the more surprising it is when something like that happens.

XI

In societies under the post-totalitarian system, all political life in the traditional sense has been eliminated. People have no opportunity to express themselves politically in public, let alone to organize politically. The gap that results is filled by ideological ritual. In such a situation, people's interest in political matters naturally dwindles and independent political thought, in so far as it exists at all, is seen by the majority as unrealistic, far-fetched, a kind of self-indulgent game, hopelessly distant from their everyday concerns; something admirable, perhaps, but quite pointless, because it is on the one hand entirely utopian and on the other hand extraordinarily dangerous, in view of the unusual vigour with which any move in that direction is persecuted by the regime.

Yet even in such societies, individuals and groups of people exist who do not abandon politics as a vocation and who, in one way or another, strive to think independently, to express themselves and in some cases even to organize politically, because that is a part of their attempt to live within the truth.

The fact that these people exist and work is in itself immensely important and worthwhile. Even in the worst of times, they maintain the continuity of political thought. If some genuine political impulse emerges from this or that 'pre-political' confrontation and is properly articulated early enough, thus increasing its chances of relative success, then this is frequently due to these isolated 'generals without an army' who, because they have maintained the continuity of political thought in the face of enormous difficulties, can at the right moment enrich the new impulse with the fruits of their own political thinking. Once again, there is ample evidence for this process in Czechoslovakia. Almost all those who were political prisoners in the early 1970s, who had apparently been made to suffer in vain because of their quixotic efforts to work politically among an utterly apathetic and demoralized society, belong today – inevitably

– among the most active Chartists. In Charter 77, the moral legacy of their earlier sacrifices is valued, and they have enriched this movement with their experience and that element of political thinking.

And yet it seems to me that the thought and activity of those friends who have never given up direct political work and who are always ready to assume direct political responsibility very often suffer from one chronic fault: an insufficient understanding of the historical uniqueness of the post-totalitarian system as a social and political reality. They have little understanding of the specific nature of power that is typical for this system and therefore they overestimate the importance of direct political work in the traditional sense. Moreover, they fail to appreciate the political significance of those 'pre-political' events and processes that provide the living humus from which genuine political change usually springs. As political actors – or, rather, as people with political ambitions – they frequently try to pick up where natural political life left off. They maintain models of behaviour that may have been appropriate in more normal political circumstances and thus, without really being aware of it, they bring an outmoded way of thinking, old habits, conceptions, categories and notions to bear on circumstances that are quite new and radically different, without first giving adequate thought to the meaning and substance of such things in the new circumstances, to what politics as such means now, to what sort of thing can have political impact and potential, and in what way. Because such people have been excluded from the structures of power and are no longer able to influence those structures directly (and because they remain faithful to traditional notions of politics established in more or less democratic societies or in classical dictatorships) they frequently, in a sense, lose touch with reality. Why make compromises with reality, they say, when none of our proposals will ever be accepted anyway? Thus they find themselves in a world of genuinely utopian thinking.

As I have already tried to indicate, however, genuinely far-reaching political events do not emerge from the same sources and in the same way in the post-totalitarian system as they do in a democracy. And if a large portion of the public is indifferent to, even sceptical of, alternative political models and programmes and the private establishment of opposition political parties, this is not merely because there is a general feeling of apathy towards public affairs and a loss of that sense of 'higher responsibility'; in other words, it is not just a consequence of the general demoralization. There is also a bit of healthy social instinct at work in this attitude. It is as if people sensed intuitively that 'nothing is what it seems any longer', as the saying goes, and that from now on, therefore, things must be done entirely differently as well.

If some of the most important political impulses in Soviet bloc countries in recent years have come initially – that is, before being felt on the level of actual power – from mathematicians, philosophers, physicians, writers, historians, ordinary workers and so on, more frequently than from politicians, and if the driving force behind the various 'dissident movements' comes from so many people in 'non-political' professions, this is not because these people are more clever than those who see themselves primarily as politicians. It is because those who are not politicians are also not so bound by traditional political thinking and political habits and therefore, paradoxically, they are more aware of genuine political reality and more sensitive to what can and should be done under the circumstances.

There is no way around it: no matter how beautiful an alternative political model may be, it can no longer speak to the 'hidden sphere', inspire people and society, call for real political ferment. The real sphere of potential politics in the post-totalitarian system is elsewhere: in the continuing and cruel tension between the complex demands of that system and the aims of life, that is, the elementary need of human beings to live, to a certain extent at least, in harmony with themselves, that is, to live in a bearable way, not to be

humiliated by their superiors and officials, not to be continually watched by the police, to be able to express themselves freely, to find an outlet for their creativity, to enjoy legal security, and so on. Anything that touches this field concretely, anything that relates to this fundamental, omnipresent and living tension, will inevitably speak to people. Abstract projects for an ideal political or economic order do not interest them to anything like the same extent – and rightly so – not only because everyone knows how little chance they have of succeeding, but also because today people feel that the less political policies are derived from a concrete and human 'here and now' and the more they fix their sights on an abstract 'some day', the more easily they can degenerate into new forms of human enslavement. People who live in the post-totalitarian system know only too well that the question of whether one or several political parties are in power, and how these parties define and label themselves, is of far less importance than the question of whether or not it is possible to live like a human being.

To shed the burden of traditional political categories and habits and open oneself up fully to the world of human existence and then to draw political conclusions only after having analysed it: this is not only politically more realistic but at the same time, from the point of view of an 'ideal state of affairs', politically more promising as well. A genuine, profound and lasting change for the better – as I shall attempt to show elsewhere – can no longer result from the victory (were such a victory possible) of any particular traditional political conception, which can ultimately be only external, that is, a structural or systemic conception. More than ever before, such a change will have to derive from human existence, from the fundamental reconstitution of the position of people in the world, their relationships to themselves and to each other, and to the universe. If a better economic and political model is to be created, then perhaps more than ever before it must derive from profound existential and moral changes in society. This is not something that can be designed and introduced like a new car. If it is to be more than just a new variation on the old degeneration, it must above all

be an expression of life in the process of transforming itself. A better system will not automatically ensure a better life. In fact the opposite is true: only by creating a better life can a better system be developed.

Once more I repeat that I am not underestimating the importance of political thought and conceptual political work. On the contrary, I think that genuine political thought and genuinely political work is precisely what we continually fail to achieve. If I say 'genuine', however, I have in mind the kind of thought and conceptual work that has freed itself of all the traditional political schemata that have been imported into our circumstances from a world that will never return (and whose return, even were it possible, would provide no permanent solution to the most important problems).

The Second and Fourth Internationals, like many other political powers and organizations, may naturally provide significant political support for various efforts of ours, but neither of them can solve our problems for us. They operate in a different world and are a product of different circumstances. Their theoretical concepts can be interesting and instructive to us but one thing is certain: we cannot solve our problems simply by identifying with these organizations. And the attempt in our country to place what we do in the context of some of the discussions that dominate political life in democratic societies often seems like sheer folly. For example, is it possible to talk seriously about whether we want to change the system or merely reform it? In the circumstances under which we live, this is a pseudo-problem, since for the time being there is simply no way we can accomplish either goal. We are not even clear about where reform ends and change begins. We know from a number of harsh experiences that neither reform nor change is in itself a guarantee of anything. We know that ultimately it is all the same to us whether or not the system in which we live, in the light of a particular doctrine, appears 'changed' or 'reformed'. Our concern is whether we can live with dignity in such a system, whether it serves people rather than people serving it. We are struggling to achieve this with the means

available to us, and the means it makes sense to employ. Western journalists, submerged in the political banalities in which they live, may label our approach as overly legalistic, as too risky, revisionist, counter-revolutionary, bourgeois, communist, or as too right-wing or left-wing. But this is the very last thing that interests us.

XII

One concept that is a constant source of confusion chiefly because it has been imported into our circumstances from circumstances that are entirely different, is the concept of an opposition. What exactly is an opposition in the post-totalitarian system?

In democratic societies with a traditional parliamentary system of government, political opposition is understood as a political force on the level of actual power (most frequently a party or coalition of parties) which is not a part of the government. It offers an alternative political programme, it has ambitions to govern, and it is recognized and respected by the government in power as a natural element in the political life of the country. It seeks to spread its influence by political means, and competes for power on the basis of agreed-upon legal regulations.

In addition to this form of opposition, there exists the phenomenon of the 'extra-parliamentary opposition', which again consists of forces organized more or less on the level of actual power, but which operate outside the rules created by the system, and which employ different means than are usual within that framework.

In classical dictatorships, the term opposition is understood to mean the political forces which have also come out with an alternative political programme. They operate either legally or on the outer limits of legality, but in any case they cannot compete for power within the limits of some agreed-upon regulations. Or the term opposition may be applied to forces preparing for a violent confrontation with the ruling power, or who feel themselves to be in this state of confrontation already, such as various guerrilla groups or liberation movements.

An opposition in the post-totalitarian system does not exist in any of these senses. In what way, then, can the term be used?

1. Occasionally the term ‘opposition’ is applied, mainly by western journalists, to persons or groups inside the power structure who find themselves in a state of hidden conflict with the highest authorities. The reasons for this conflict may be certain differences (not very sharp differences, naturally) of a conceptual nature, but more frequently it is quite simply a longing for power or a personal antipathy to others who represent that power.
2. Opposition here can also be understood as everything that does or can have an indirect political effect in the sense already mentioned, that is, everything the post-totalitarian system feels threatened by, which in fact means everything it is threatened by. In this sense, the opposition is every attempt to live within the truth, from the green-grocer’s refusal to put the slogan in his window to a freely written poem; in other words, everything in which the genuine aims of life go beyond the limits placed on them by the aims of the system.
3. More frequently, however, the opposition is usually understood (again, largely by western journalists) as groups of people who make public their nonconformist stances and critical opinions, who make no secret of their independent thinking and who, to a greater or lesser degree, consider themselves a political force. In this sense, the notion of an ‘opposition’ more or less overlaps with the notion of ‘dissent’, although, of course, there are great differences in the degree to which that label is accepted or rejected. It depends not only on the extent to which these people understand their power as a directly political force, and on whether they have ambitions to participate in actual power, but also on how each of them understands the notion of an ‘opposition’.

Again, here is an example: in its original declaration, Charter 77 emphasized that it was not an opposition because it had no intention of presenting an alternative political programme. It sees its mission as something quite different, for it has not presented such

programmes. In fact, if the presenting of an alternative programme defines the nature of an opposition in post-totalitarian states, then the Charter cannot be considered an opposition.

The Czechoslovak government, however, has considered Charter 77 as an expressly oppositional association from the very beginning, and has treated it accordingly. This means that the government – and this is only natural – understands the term 'opposition' more or less as I defined it in point 2, that is, as everything that manages to avoid total manipulation and which therefore denies the principle that the system has an absolute claim on the individual.

If we accept this definition of opposition, then of course we must, along with the government, consider the Charter a genuine opposition, because it represents a serious challenge to the integrity of post-totalitarian power, founded as it is on the universality of 'living with a lie'.

It is a different matter, however, when we look at the extent to which individual signatories of Charter 77 think of themselves as an opposition. My impression is that most base their understanding of the term opposition on the traditional meaning of the word as it became established in democratic societies (or in classical dictatorships); therefore, they understand 'opposition', even in Czechoslovakia, as a politically defined force which, although it does not operate on the level of actual power, and even less within the framework of certain rules respected by the government, would still not reject the opportunity to participate in actual power because it has, in a sense, an alternative political programme whose proponents are prepared to accept direct political responsibility for it. Given this notion of an opposition, some Chartists – the great majority – do not see themselves in this way. Others – a minority – do, even though they fully respect the fact that there is no room within Charter 77 for 'oppositional' activity in this sense. At the same time, however, perhaps every Chartist is familiar enough with the specific nature of conditions in the post-totalitarian system to realize that it is not only the struggle for human rights that has its

own peculiar political power, but incomparably more ‘innocent’ activities as well, and therefore they can be understood as an aspect of opposition. No Chartist can really object to being considered in ‘opposition’ in this sense.

There is another circumstance, however, that considerably complicates matters. For many decades, the power-ruling society in the Soviet bloc has used the label ‘opposition’ as the blackest of indictments, as synonymous with the word ‘enemy’. To brand someone ‘a member of the opposition’ is tantamount to saying he or she is trying to overthrow the government and put an end to socialism (naturally in the pay of the imperialists). There have been times when this label led straight to the gallows, and of course this does not encourage people to apply the same label to themselves. Moreover, it is only a word, and what is actually done is more important than how it is labelled.

The final reason why many reject such a term is because there is something negative about the notion of an ‘opposition’. People who so define themselves do so in relation to a prior ‘position’. In other words, they relate themselves specifically to the power that rules society and through it, define themselves, deriving their own ‘position’ from the position of the regime. For people who have simply decided to live within the truth, to say aloud what they think, to express their solidarity with their fellow citizens, to create as they want and simply to live in harmony with their better ‘self’, it is naturally disagreeable to feel required to define their own, original and positive ‘position’ negatively, in terms of something else, and to think of themselves primarily as people who are against something, not simply as people who are what they are.

Obviously, the only way to avoid misunderstanding is to say clearly – before one starts using them – in what sense the terms ‘opposition’ and ‘member of the opposition’ are being used and how they are in fact to be understood in our circumstances.

XIII

If the term ‘opposition’ has been imported from democratic societies into the post-totalitarian system without general agreement on what the word means in conditions that are so different, then the term ‘dissident’ was, on the contrary, chosen by western journalists and is now generally accepted as the label for a phenomenon peculiar to the post-totalitarian system and almost never occurring – at least not in that form – in democratic societies.

Who are these ‘dissidents’?

It seems that the term is applied primarily to citizens of the Soviet bloc who have decided to live within the truth and who, in addition, meet the following criteria:

1. They express their nonconformist positions and critical opinions publicly and systematically, within the very strict limits available to them, and because of this, they are known in the West.
2. Despite being unable to publish at home and despite every possible form of persecution by their governments, they have, by virtue of their attitudes, managed to win a certain esteem, both from the public and from their government, and thus they actually enjoy a very limited and very strange degree of indirect, actual power in their own milieu as well. This either protects them from the worst forms of persecution, or at least it ensures that if they are persecuted, it will mean certain political complications for their governments.
3. The horizon of their critical attention and their commitment reaches beyond the narrow context of their immediate surroundings or special interests to embrace more general causes and, thus, their work becomes political in nature, although the degree to which they think of themselves as a directly political force may vary a great deal.

4. They are people who lean towards intellectual pursuits, that is, they are 'writing' people, people for whom the written word is the primary – and often the only – political medium they command, and that can gain them attention, particularly from abroad. Other ways in which they seek to live within the truth are either lost to the foreign observer in the elusive local milieu or – if they reach beyond this local framework – they appear to be only somewhat less visible complements to what they have written.
5. Regardless of their actual vocations, these people are talked about in the West more frequently in terms of their activities as committed citizens, or in terms of the critical, political aspects of their work, than in terms of the 'real' work they do in their own fields. From personal experience, I know that there is an invisible line you cross – without even wanting to or becoming aware of it – beyond which they cease to treat you as a writer who happens to be a concerned citizen and begin talking of you as a 'dissident' who almost incidentally (in his or her spare time, perhaps?) happens to write plays as well.

Unquestionably, there are people who meet all of these criteria. What is debatable is whether we should be using a special term for a group defined in such an essentially accidental way, and specifically, whether they should be called 'dissidents'. It does happen, however, and there is clearly nothing we can do about it. Sometimes, to facilitate communication, we even use the label ourselves, although it is done with distaste, rather ironically, and almost always in quotation marks.

Perhaps it is now appropriate to outline some of the reasons why 'dissidents' themselves are not very happy to be referred to in this way. In the first place, the word is problematic from an etymological point of view. A 'dissident', we are told in our press, means something like 'renegade' or 'backslider'. But dissidents do not consider themselves renegades for the simple reason that they are not primarily denying or rejecting anything. On the contrary, they

have tried to affirm their own human identity, and if they reject anything at all, then it is merely what was false and alienating in their lives, that aspect of 'living within a lie'.

But that is not the most important thing. The term 'dissident' frequently implies a special profession, as if, along with the more normal vocations, there was another special one – grumbling about the state of things. In fact, a 'dissident' is simply a physicist, a sociologist, a worker, a poet, individuals who are merely doing what they feel they must and, consequently, who find themselves in open conflict with the regime. This conflict has not come about through any conscious intention on their part, but simply through the inner logic of their thinking, behaviour or work (often confronted with external circumstances more or less beyond their control). They have not, in other words, consciously decided to be professional malcontents, rather as one decides to be a tailor or a blacksmith.

In fact, of course, they do not usually discover they are 'dissidents' until long after they have actually become one. 'Dissent' springs from motivations far different from the desire for titles or fame. In short, they do not decide to become 'dissidents', and even if they were to devote twenty-four hours a day to it, it would still not be a profession, but primarily an existential attitude. Moreover, it is an attitude that is in no way the exclusive property of those who have earned themselves the title of 'dissident' just because they happen to fulfil those accidental external conditions already mentioned. There are thousands of nameless people who try to live within the truth and millions who want to but cannot, perhaps only because to do so in the circumstances in which they live, they would need ten times the courage of those who have already taken the first step. If several dozen are randomly chosen from among all these people and put into a special category, this can utterly distort the general picture. It does so in two different ways. Either it suggests that 'dissidents' are a group of prominent people, a 'protected species' who are permitted to do things others are not and whom the government may even be cultivating as living proof of its generosity; or it lends

support to the illusion that since there is no more than a handful of malcontents to whom not very much is really being done, all the rest are therefore content, for were they not so, they would be 'dissidents' too.

But that is not all. This categorization also unintentionally supports the impression that the primary concern of these 'dissidents' is some vested interest that they share as a group, as though their entire argument with the government were no more than a rather abstruse conflict between two opposed groups, a conflict that leaves society out of it altogether. But such an impression profoundly contradicts the real importance of the 'dissident' attitude, which stands or falls on its interest in others, in what ails society as a whole, in other words, on an interest in all those who do not speak up. If 'dissidents' have any kind of authority at all and if they have not been exterminated long ago like exotic insects that have appeared where they have no business being, then this is not because the government holds this exclusive group and their exclusive ideas in such awe, but because it is perfectly aware of the potential political power of 'living within the truth' rooted in the hidden sphere, and well aware too of the kind of world 'dissent' grows out of and the world it addresses: the everyday human world, the world of daily tension between the aims of life and the aims of the system. (Can there be any better evidence of this than the government's action after Charter 77 appeared, when it launched a campaign to compel the entire nation to declare that Charter 77 was wrong? Those millions of signatures proved, among other things, that just the opposite was true.) The political organs and the police do not lavish such enormous attention on 'dissidents' – which may give the impression that the government fears them as they might fear an alternative power clique – because they actually are such a power clique, but because they are ordinary people with ordinary cares, differing from the rest only in that they say aloud what the rest cannot say or are afraid to say. I have already mentioned Solzhenitsyn's political influence: it does not reside in some exclusive political power he possesses as a individual, but in the

experience of those millions of Gulag victims which he simply amplified and communicated to millions of other people of good will.

To institutionalize a select category of well-known or prominent 'dissidents' means in fact to deny the most intrinsic moral aspect of their activity. As we have seen, the 'dissident movement' grows out of the principle of equality, founded on the notion that human rights and freedoms are indivisible. After all, did not 'well-known dissidents' unite in *KOR* to defend unknown workers? And was it not precisely for this reason that they became 'well-known dissidents'? And did not the 'well-known dissidents' unite in Charter 77 after they had been brought together in defence of those unknown musicians, and did they not unite in the Charter precisely with them, and did they not become 'well-known dissidents' precisely because of that? It is truly a cruel paradox that the more some citizens stand up in defence of other citizens, the more they are labelled with a word that in effect separates them from those 'other citizens'.

This explanation, I hope, will make clear the significance of the quotation marks I have put around the word 'dissident' throughout this essay.

XIV

At the time when the Czech lands and Slovakia were an integral part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and when there existed neither the historical nor the political, psychological or social conditions that would have enabled the Czechs and Slovaks to seek their identity outside the framework of this empire, T. G. Masaryk established a Czechoslovak national programme based on the notion of 'small-scale work' (*drobná práce*). By that he meant honest and responsible work in widely different areas of life but within the existing social order, work that would stimulate national creativity and national self-confidence. Naturally he placed particular emphasis on intelligent and enlightened upbringing and education, and on the moral and humanitarian aspects of life. Masaryk believed that the only possible starting point for a more dignified national destiny was humanity itself. Humanity's first task was to create the conditions for a more human life; and in Masaryk's view, the task of transforming the stature of the nation began with the transformation of human beings.

This notion of 'working for the good of the nation' took root in Czechoslovak society and in many ways it was successful and is still alive today. Along with those who exploit the notion as a sophisticated excuse for collaborating with the regime, there are still many, even today, who genuinely uphold the ideal and, in some areas at least, can point to indisputable achievements. It is hard to say how much worse things would be if there were not many hard-working people who simply refused to give up and try constantly to do the best they can, paying an unavoidable minimum to 'living within a lie' so that they might give their utmost to the authentic needs of society. These people assume, correctly, that every piece of good work is an indirect criticism of bad politics, and that there are situations where it is worthwhile going this route, even though it means surrendering one's natural right to make direct criticisms.

Today, however, there are very clear limitations to this attitude, even compared to the situation in the 1960s. More and more frequently, those who attempt to practise the principle of 'small-scale work' come up against the post-totalitarian system and find themselves facing a dilemma: either one retreats from that position, dilutes the honesty, responsibility and consistency on which it is based and simply adapts to circumstances (the approach taken by the majority), or one continues on the way begun and inevitably comes into conflict with the regime (the approach taken by a minority).

If the notion of small-scale work was never intended as an imperative to survive in the existing social and political structure *at any cost* (in which case individuals who allowed themselves to be excluded from that structure would necessarily appear to have given up 'working for the nation') then today it is even less significant. There is no general model of behaviour, that is, no neat, universally valid way of determining the point at which small-scale work ceases to be 'for the good of the nation' and becomes 'detrimental to the nation'. It is more than clear, however, that the danger of such a reversal is becoming more and more acute and that small-scale work, with increasing frequency, is coming up against that limit beyond which avoiding conflict means compromising its very essence.

In 1974, when I was employed in a brewery, my immediate superior was a certain Š, a person well-versed in the art of making beer. He was proud of his profession and he wanted our brewery to brew good beer. He spent almost all his time at work, continually thinking up improvements and he frequently made the rest of us feel uncomfortable because he assumed that we loved brewing as much as he did. In the midst of the slovenly indifference to work that socialism encourages, a more constructive worker would be difficult to imagine.

The brewery itself was managed by people who understood their work less and were less fond of it, but who were politically more influential. They were bringing the brewery to ruin and not only did

they fail to react to any of Š's suggestions, but they actually became increasingly hostile towards him and tried in every way to thwart his efforts to do a good job. Eventually the situation became so bad that Š felt compelled to write a lengthy letter to the manager's superior, in which he attempted to analyse the brewery's difficulties. He explained why it was the worst in the district and pointed to those responsible.

His voice might have been heard. The manager, who was politically powerful but otherwise ignorant of beer, a man who loathed workers and was given to intrigue, might have been replaced and conditions in the brewery might have been improved on the basis of Š's suggestions. Had this happened, it would have been a perfect example of small-scale work in action. Unfortunately the precise opposite occurred: the manager of the brewery, who was a member of the Communist Party's district committee, had friends in higher places and he saw to it that the situation was resolved in his favour. Š's analysis was described as a 'defamatory document' and Š himself was labelled a 'political saboteur'. He was thrown out of the brewery and shifted to another one where he was given a job requiring no skill. Here the notion of small-scale work had come up against the wall of the post-totalitarian system. By speaking the truth, Š had stepped out of line, broken the rules, cast himself out, and he ended up as a sub-citizen, stigmatized as an enemy. He could now say anything he wanted, but he could never, as a matter of principle, expect to be heard. He had become the 'dissident' of the Eastern Bohemian Brewery.

I think this is a model case which, from another point of view, illustrates what I have already said in the preceding section: you do not become a 'dissident' just because you decide one day to take up this most unusual career. You are thrown into it by your personal sense of responsibility, combined with a complex set of external circumstances. You are cast out of the existing structures and placed in a position of conflict with them. It begins as an attempt to do your work well, and ends with being branded an enemy of

society. This is why our situation is not comparable to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when the Czech nation, in the worst period of Bach's absolutism,fn1 had only one real 'dissident', Karel Havlicek, who was imprisoned in Brixen. Today, if we are not to be snobbish about it, we must admit that 'dissidents' can be found on every street-corner.

To rebuke 'dissidents' for having abandoned 'small-scale work' is simply absurd. 'Dissent' is not an alternative to Masaryk's notion, it is frequently its only possible outcome. I say 'frequently' in order to emphasize that this is not always the case. I am far from believing that the only decent and responsible people are those who find themselves at odds with the existing social and political structures. After all, the brewmaster Š might have won his battle. To condemn those who have kept their positions simply because they have kept them, in other words, for not being 'dissidents', would be just as absurd as to hold them up as an example to the 'dissidents'. In any case, it contradicts the whole 'dissident' attitude – seen as an attempt to live within the truth – if one judges human behaviour not according to what it is and whether it is good or not, but according to the personal circumstances such an attempt has brought one to.

XV

Our greengrocer's attempt to live within the truth may be confined to not doing certain things. He decides not to put flags in his window when his only motive for putting them there in the first place would have been to avoid being reported by the house warden; he does not vote in elections that he considers false; he does not hide his opinions from his superiors. In other words, he may go no further than 'merely' refusing to comply with certain demands made on him by the system (which of course is not an insignificant step to take). This may, however, grow into something more. The greengrocer may begin to do something concrete, something that goes beyond an immediately personal self-defensive reaction against manipulation, something that will manifest his new-found sense of higher responsibility. He may, for example, organize his fellow greengrocers to act together in defence of their interests. He may write letters to various institutions, drawing their attention to instances of disorder and injustice around him. He may seek out unofficial literature, copy it and lend it to his friends.

If what I have called living within the truth is a basic existential (and of course potentially political) starting point for all those 'independent citizens' initiatives' and 'dissident' or 'opposition' movements dealt with in the essays to follow, this does not mean that every attempt to live within the truth automatically belongs in this category. On the contrary, in its most original and broadest sense, living within the truth covers a vast territory whose outer limits are vague and difficult to map, a territory full of modest expressions of human volition, the vast majority of which will remain anonymous and whose political impact will probably never be felt or described any more concretely than simply as a part of a social climate or mood. Most of these expressions remain elementary revolts against manipulation: you simply straighten your backbone and live in greater dignity as an individual.

Here and there – thanks to the nature, the assumptions and the professions of some people, but also thanks to a number of accidental circumstances such as the specific nature of the local milieu, friends, and so on – a more coherent and visible initiative may emerge from this wide and anonymous hinterland, an initiative that transcends 'merely' individual revolt and is transformed into more conscious, structured and purposeful work. The point where living within the truth ceases to be a mere negation of living with a lie and becomes articulate in a particular way, is the point at which something is born that might be called 'the independent spiritual, social and political life of society'. This independent life is not separated from the rest of life ('dependent life') by some sharply defined line. Both types frequently coexist in the same people. Nevertheless, its most important focus is marked by a relatively high degree of inner emancipation. It sails upon the vast ocean of the manipulated life like little boats, tossed by the waves but always bobbing back as visible messengers of living within the truth, articulating the suppressed aims of life.

What is this independent life of society? The spectrum of its expressions and activities is naturally very wide. It includes everything from self-education and thinking about the world, through free creative activity and its communication to others, to the most varied free, civic attitudes, including instances of independent social self-organization. In short, it is an area in which living within the truth becomes articulate and materializes in a visible way.

Thus what will later be referred to as 'citizens' initiatives', 'dissident movements' or even 'oppositions', emerge, like the proverbial one-tenth of the iceberg visible above the water, from that area, from the independent life of society. In other words, just as the independent life of society develops out of living within the truth in the widest sense of the word, as the distinct, articulated expression of that life, so 'dissent' gradually emerges from the 'independent life of society'. Yet there is a marked difference: if the independent life of society,

externally at least, can be understood as a higher form of living within the truth, it is far less certain that 'dissident movements' are necessarily a higher form of the 'independent life of society'. They are simply one manifestation of it and though they may be the most visible and, at first glance, the most political (and most clearly articulated) expression of it, they are far from necessarily being the most mature or even the most important, not only in the general social sense but even in terms of direct political influence. After all, 'dissent' has been artificially removed from its place of birth by having been given a special name. In fact, however, it is not possible to think of it separated from the whole background out of which it develops, of which it is an integral part, and from which it draws all its vital strength. In any case, it follows from what has already been said about the peculiarities of the post-totalitarian system that what *appears* to be the most political of forces in a given moment, and what thinks of itself in such terms, need not necessarily in fact *be* such a force. The extent to which it is a real political force is due exclusively to its pre-political context.

What follows from this description? Nothing more and nothing less than this: it is impossible to talk about what in fact 'dissidents' do and the effect of their work without first talking about the work of all those who, in one way or another, take part in the independent life of society and who are not necessarily 'dissidents' at all. They may be writers who write as they wish without regard for censorship or official demands and who issue their work – when official publishers refuse to print them – as *samizdat*. They may be philosophers, historians, sociologists and all those who practise independent scholarship and, if it is impossible through official or semi-official channels, who also circulate their work in *samizdat* or who organize private discussions, lectures and seminars. They may be teachers who privately teach young people things that are kept from them in the state schools; clergymen who either in office or, if they are deprived of their charges, outside it, try to carry on a free religious life; painters, musicians and singers who practise their work regardless of how it is looked upon by official institutions;

everyone who shares this independent culture and helps to spread it; people who, using the means available to them, try to express and defend the actual social interests of workers, to put real meaning back into trade unions or to form independent ones; people who are not afraid to call the attention of officials to cases of injustice and who strive to see that the laws are observed; and the different groups of young people who try to extricate themselves from manipulation and live in their own way, in the spirit of their own hierarchy of values. The list could go on.

Very few would think of calling all these people 'dissidents'. And yet are not the well-known 'dissidents' simply people like them? Are not all these activities in fact what 'dissidents' do as well? Do they not produce scholarly work and publish it in *samizdat*? Do they not write plays and novels and poems? Do they not lecture to students in private 'universities'? Do they not struggle against various forms of injustice and attempt to ascertain and express the genuine social interests of various sectors of the population?

After having tried to indicate the sources, the inner structure and some aspects of the 'dissident' attitude as such, I have clearly shifted my viewpoint from outside, as it were, to an investigation of what these 'dissidents' *actually* do, how their initiatives are manifested and where they lead.

The first conclusion to be drawn, then, is that the original and most important sphere of activity, one that predetermines all the others, is simply an attempt to create and support the 'independent life of society' as an articulated expression of 'living within the truth'. In other words, serving truth consistently, purposefully and articulately, and organizing this service. This is only natural, after all: if living within the truth is an elementary starting point for every attempt made by people to oppose the alienating pressure of the system, if it is the only meaningful basis of any independent act of political import, and if, ultimately, it is also the most intrinsic existential source of the 'dissident' attitude, then it is difficult to imagine that even manifest 'dissent' could have any other basis than

the service of truth, the truthful life and the attempt to make room for the genuine aims of life.

XVI

The post-totalitarian system is mounting a total assault on humans and humans stand against it alone, abandoned and isolated. It is therefore entirely natural that all the 'dissident movements' are explicitly defensive movements: they exist to defend human beings and the genuine aims of life against the aims of the system.

Today the Polish group KOR is called the Committee for Social Self-Defence. The word 'defence' appears in the names of other similar groups in Poland, but even the Soviet Helsinki monitoring group and our own Charter 77 are clearly defensive in nature. In terms of traditional politics, this programme of defence is understandable, even though it may appear minimal, provisional and ultimately negative. It offers no new conception, model or ideology, and therefore it is not 'politics'·in the proper sense of the word, since politics always assumes a 'positive' programme and can scarcely limit itself to defending someone against something.

Such a view, I think, reveals the limitations of the traditionally political way of looking at things. The post-totalitarian system, after all, is not the manifestation of a particular political line followed by a particular government. It is something radically different: it is a complex, profound and long-term violation of society, or rather the self-violation of society. To oppose it merely by establishing a different political line and then striving for a change in government would not only be unrealistic, it would be utterly inadequate, for it would never come near to touching the root of the matter. For some time now, the problem has no longer resided in a political line or programme: it is a problem of life itself.

Thus defending the aims of life, defending humanity is not only a more realistic approach, since it can begin right now and is potentially more popular because it concerns people's everyday lives; at the same time (and perhaps precisely because of this) it is

also an incomparably more consistent approach because it aims at the very essence of things.

There are times when we must sink to the bottom of our misery to understand truth, just as we must descend to the bottom of a well to see the stars in broad daylight. It seems to me that today, this ‘provisional’, ‘minimal’ and ‘negative’ programme – the ‘simple’ defence of people – is in a particular sense (and not merely in the circumstances in which we live) an optimal and most positive programme because it forces politics to return to its only proper starting point, proper that is, if all the old mistakes are to be avoided: individual people. In democratic societies, where the violence done to human beings is not nearly so obvious and cruel, this fundamental revolution in politics has yet to happen, and some things will probably have to get worse there before the urgent need for that revolution is reflected in politics. In our world, precisely because of the misery in which we find ourselves, it would seem that politics has already undergone that transformation: the central concern of political thought is no longer abstract visions of a self-redeeming, ‘positive’ model (and of course the opportunistic political practices that are the reverse of the same coin), but rather the people who have so far merely been enslaved by those models and their practices.

Every society, of course, requires some degree of organization. Yet if that organization is to serve people and not the other way around, then people will have to be liberated and space created so that they may organize themselves in meaningful ways. The depravity of the opposite approach, in which people are first organized in one way or another (by someone who always knows best ‘what the people need’) so they may then allegedly be liberated, is something we have known on our own skins only too well.

To sum up: most people who are too bound to the traditional political way of thinking see the weaknesses of the ‘dissident movements’ in their purely defensive character. In contrast, I see that as their greatest strength. I believe that this is precisely where

these movements supercede the kind of politics from whose point of view their programme can seem so inadequate.

XVII

In the ‘dissident movements’ of the Soviet bloc, the defence of human beings usually takes the form of a defence of human and civil rights as they are entrenched in various official documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference and the constitutions of individual states. These movements set out to defend anyone who is being prosecuted for acting in the spirit of those rights, and they in turn act in the same spirit in their work, by insisting over and over again that the regime recognize and respect human and civil rights, and by drawing attention to the areas of life where this is not the case.

Their work, therefore, is based on the principle of legality: they operate publicly and openly, insisting not only that their activity is in line with the law, but that achieving respect for the law is one of their main aims. This principle of legality, which provides both the point of departure and the framework for their activities, is common to all ‘dissident’ groups in the Soviet bloc, even though individual groups have never worked out any formal agreement on that point. This circumstance raises an important question: Why, in conditions where a widespread and arbitrary abuse of power is the rule, is there such a general and spontaneous acceptance of the principle of legality?

On the primary level, this stress on legality is a natural expression of specific conditions that exist in the post-totalitarian system, and the consequence of an elementary understanding of that specificity. If there are in essence only two ways to struggle for a free society – that is, through legal means and through (armed or unarmed) revolt – then it should be obvious at once how inappropriate the latter alternative is in the post-totalitarian system. Revolt is appropriate when conditions are clearly and openly in motion, during a war for example, or in situations where social or political conflicts are

coming to a head. It is appropriate in a classical dictatorship that is either just setting itself up or is in a state of collapse. In other words, it is appropriate where social forces of comparable strength (for example, a government of occupation vs a nation fighting for its freedom) are confronting each other on the level of actual power, or where there is a clear distinction between the usurpers of power and the subjugated population, or when society finds itself in a state of open crisis. Conditions in the post-totalitarian system – except in extremely explosive situations like the one in Hungary in 1956 – are, of course, precisely the opposite. They are static and stable, and social crises, for the most part, exist only latently (though they run much deeper). Society is not sharply polarized on the level of actual political power, but, as we have seen, the fundamental lines of conflict run right through each person. In this situation, no attempt at revolt could ever hope to set up even a minimum of resonance in the rest of society, because that society is 'soporific', submerged in a consumer rat-race and wholly involved in the post-totalitarian system (that is, participating in it and acting as agents of its 'automatism'), and it would simply find anything like revolt unacceptable. It would interpret the revolt as an attack upon itself and, rather than supporting the revolt, it would very probably react by intensifying its bias towards the system, since, in its view, the system can at least guarantee a certain quasi-legality. Add to this the fact that the post-totalitarian system has at its disposal a complex mechanism of direct and indirect surveillance that has no equal in history and it is clear that not only would any attempt to revolt come to a dead end politically, but it would also be almost technically impossible to carry off. Most probably it would be liquidated before it had a chance to translate its intentions into action. Even if revolt were possible, however, it would remain the solitary gesture of a few isolated individuals and they would be opposed not only by a gigantic apparatus of national (and supranational) power, but also by the very society in whose name they were mounting their revolt in the first place. (This, by the way, is another reason why the regime and its propaganda have been

ascribing terroristic aims to the ‘dissident movements’ and accusing them of illegal and conspiratorial methods.)

All of this, however, is not the main reason why the ‘dissident movements’ support the principle of legality. That reason lies deeper, in the innermost structure of the ‘dissident’ attitude. This attitude is and must be fundamentally hostile towards the notion of violent change as such to the system – and every revolt, essentially, aims at violent change – simply because it places its faith in violence. (Generally, the ‘dissident’ attitude can only accept violence as a necessary evil in extreme situations, when direct violence can only be met by violence and where remaining passive would in effect mean supporting violence: let us recall, for example, that the blindness of European pacifism was one of the factors that prepared the ground for the Second World War.) As I have already mentioned, ‘dissidents’ tend to be sceptical about political thought based on the faith that profound social changes can only be achieved by bringing about (regardless of the method) changes in the system or in the government, and the belief that such changes – because they are considered ‘fundamental’ – justify the sacrifice of ‘less fundamental’ things, in other words, human lives. Respect for a theoretical concept here outweighs respect for human life. Yet this is precisely what threatens to enslave humanity all over again.

‘Dissident movements’, as I have tried to indicate, share exactly the opposite view. They understand systemic change as something superficial, something secondary, something that in itself can guarantee nothing. Thus an attitude that turns away from abstract political visions of the future towards concrete human beings and ways of defending them effectively in the here and now is quite naturally accompanied by an intensified antipathy to all forms of violence carried out in the name of ‘a better future’, and by a profound belief that a future secured by violence might actually be worse than what exists now; in other words, the future would be fatally stigmatized by the very means used to secure it. At the same time, this attitude is not to be mistaken for political conservatism or

political moderation. The 'dissident movements' do not shy away from the idea of violent political overthrow because the idea seems too radical, but on the contrary, because it does not seem radical enough. For them, the problem lies far too deep to be settled through mere systemic changes, either governmental or technological. Some people, faithful to the classical Marxist doctrines of the nineteenth century, understand our system as the hegemony of an exploiting class over an exploited class and, operating from the postulate that exploiters never surrender their power voluntarily, they see the only solution in a revolution to sweep away the exploiters. Naturally, they regard such things as the struggle for human rights as something hopelessly legalistic, illusory, opportunistic and ultimately misleading because it makes the doubtful assumption that you can negotiate in good faith with your exploiters on the basis of a false legality. The problem is that they are unable to find anyone determined enough to carry out this revolution, with the result that they become bitter, sceptical, passive and ultimately apathetic – in other words, they end up precisely where the system wants them to be. This is one example of how far one can be misled by mechanically applying, in post-totalitarian circumstances, ideological models from another world and another time.

Of course, one need not be an advocate of violent revolution to ask whether an appeal to legality makes any sense at all when the laws – and particularly the general laws concerning human rights – are no more than a façade, an aspect of the world of appearances, a mere game behind which lies total manipulation. 'They can ratify anything because they will still go ahead and do whatever they want anyway' – this is an opinion we often encounter. Is it not true that to constantly 'take them at their word', to appeal to laws every child knows are binding only as long as the government wishes, is in the end just a kind of hypocrisy, a Švejkian obstructionism and, finally, just another way of playing the game, another form of self-delusion? In other words, is the legalistic approach at all compatible with the principle of 'living within the truth'?

This question can only be answered by first looking at the wider implications of how the legal code functions in the post-totalitarian system.

In a classical dictatorship, to a far greater extent than in the post-totalitarian system, the will of the ruler is carried out directly, in an unregulated fashion. A dictatorship has no reason to hide its foundations, nor to conceal the real workings of power, and therefore it need not encumber itself to any great extent with a legal code. The post-totalitarian system, on the other hand, is utterly obsessed with the need to bind everything in a single order: life in such a state is thoroughly permeated by a dense network of regulations, proclamations, directives, norms, orders and rules. (It is not called a bureaucratic system without good reason.) A large proportion of those norms functions as direct instruments of the complex manipulation of life that is intrinsic to the post-totalitarian system. Individuals are reduced to little more than tiny cogs in an enormous mechanism and their significance is limited to their function in this mechanism. Their job, housing accommodation, movements, social and cultural expressions, everything, in short, must be cossetted together as firmly as possible, predetermined, regulated and controlled. Every aberration from the prescribed course of life is treated as error, licence and anarchy. From the cook in the restaurant who, without hard-to-get permission from the bureaucratic apparatus, cannot cook something special for his customers, to the singer who cannot perform his new song at a concert without bureaucratic approval, everyone, in all aspects of their life, is caught in this regulatory tangle of red tape, the inevitable product of the post-totalitarian system. With ever-increasing consistency, it binds all the expressions and aims of life to the spirit of its own aims: the vested interests of its own smooth, automatic operation.

In a narrower sense the legal code serves the post-totalitarian system in this direct way as well, that is, it too forms a part of the world of regulations and prohibitions. At the same time, however, it

performs the same service in another indirect way, one that brings it remarkably closer – depending on which level of the law is involved – to ideology and in some cases making it a direct component of that ideology.

1. Like ideology, the legal code functions as an excuse. It wraps the base exercise of power in the noble apparel of the letter of the law; it creates the pleasing illusion that justice is done, society protected and the exercise of power objectively regulated. All this is done to conceal the real essence of post-totalitarian legal practice: the total manipulation of society. If an outside observer who knew nothing at all about life in Czechoslovakia were to study only its laws, he or she would be utterly incapable of understanding what we were complaining about. The hidden political manipulation of the courts and of public prosecutors, the limitations placed on lawyers' ability to defend their clients, the closed nature, *de facto*, of trials, the arbitrary actions of the security forces, their position of authority over the judiciary, the absurdly broad application of several deliberately vague sections of that code, and of course the state's utter disregard for the positive sections of that code (the rights of citizens): all of this would remain hidden from our outside observer. The only thing he or she would take away would be the impression that our legal code is not much worse than the legal code of other civilized countries, and not much different either, except perhaps for certain curiosities, such as the entrenchment in the constitution of a single political party's eternal rule and the state's love for a neighbouring superpower. But that is not all: if our observer had the opportunity to study the formal side of policing and judicial procedures and practices, how they look 'on paper', he or she would discover that for the most part the common rules of criminal procedure are observed: charges are laid within the prescribed period following arrest, and it is the same with detention orders. Indictments are properly delivered, the accused has a lawyer, and so on. In other words, everyone has

an excuse: *they have all observed the law*. In reality, however, they have cruelly and pointlessly ruined a young person's life, perhaps for no other reason than because he or she made *samizdat* copies of a novel written by a banned writer, or because the police deliberately falsified their testimony (as everyone knows, from the judge on down to the defendant). Yet all of this somehow remains in the background. The falsified testimony is not necessarily obvious from the trial documents and the section of the criminal code dealing with incitement does not formally exclude the application of that charge to the copying of a banned novel. In other words, the legal code – at least in several areas – is not more than a façade, an aspect of the world of appearances. Then why is it there at all? For exactly the same reason as ideology is there: it provides a bridge of excuses between the system and individuals, making it easier for them to enter the power structure and serve the arbitrary demands of power. The excuse lets individuals fool themselves into thinking they are merely upholding the law and protecting society from criminals. (Without this excuse, how much more difficult it would be to recruit new generations of judges, prosecutors and interrogators!) As an aspect of the world of appearances, however, the legal code deceives not only the conscience of prosecutors, it deceives the public, it deceives foreign observers, and it even deceives history itself.

2. Like ideology, the legal code is an essential instrument of ritual communication outside the power structure. It is the legal code that gives the exercise of power a form, a framework, a set of rules. It is the legal code that enables all components of the system to communicate, to put themselves in a good light, to establish their own legitimacy. It provides their whole game with its 'rules' and engineers with their technology. Can the exercise of post-totalitarian power be imagined at all without this universal ritual making it all possible, serving as a common language to bind the relevant sectors of the power structure

> together? The more important the position occupied by the repressive apparatus in the power structure, the more important that it functions according to some kind of formal code. How, otherwise, could people be so easily and inconspicuously locked up for copying banned books if there were no judges, prosecutors, interrogators, defence lawyers, court stenographers and thick files, and if all this were not held together by some firm order? And above all, without that innocent-looking Section 100 on incitement? This could all be done, of course, without a legal code and its accessories, but only in some ephemeral dictatorship run by a Ugandan bandit, not in a system that embraces such a huge portion of civilized humankind and represents an integral, stable and respected part of the modern world. That would not only be unthinkable, it would quite simply be technically impossible. Without the legal code functioning as a ritually cohesive force, the post-totalitarian system could not exist.

The entire role of ritual, façades and excuses appears most eloquently, of course, not in the proscriptive section of the legal code, which sets out what a citizen may not do and what the grounds for prosecution are, but in the section declaring what he or she may do and what his or her rights are. Here there is truly nothing but 'words, words, words'. Yet even that part of the code is of immense importance to the system, for it is here that the system establishes its legitimacy as a whole, before its own citizens, before school children, before the international public and before history. The system cannot afford to disregard this because it cannot permit itself to cast doubt upon the fundamental postulates of its ideology, which are so essential to its very existence. (We have already seen how the power structure is enslaved by its own ideology and its ideological prestige.) To do this would be to deny everything it tries to present itself as and, thus, one of the main pillars on which the system rests would be undermined: the integrity of the world of appearances.

If the exercise of power circulates through the whole power structure as blood flows though veins, then the legal code can be understood as something that reinforces the walls of those veins. Without it, the blood of power could not circulate in an organized way and the body of society would haemorrhage at random. Order would collapse.

A persistent and never-ending appeal to the laws – not just to the laws concerning human rights, but to all laws – does not mean at all that those who do so have succumbed to the illusion that in our system the law is anything other than what it is. They are well aware of the role it plays. But precisely because they know how desperately the system depends on it – on the 'noble' version of the law, that is – they also know how enormously significant such appeals are. Because the system cannot do without the law, because it is hopelessly tied down by the necessity of pretending the laws are observed, it is compelled to react in some way to such appeals. Demanding that the laws be upheld is thus an act of living within the truth that threatens the whole mendacious structure at its point of maximum mendacity. Over and over again, such appeals make the purely ritualistic nature of the law clear to society and to those who inhabit its power structures. They draw attention to its real material substance and thus, indirectly, compel all those who take refuge behind the law to affirm and make credible this agency of excuses, this means of communication, this reinforcement of the social arteries outside of which their will could not be made to circulate through society. They are compelled to do so for the sake of their own consciences, for the impression they make on outsiders, to maintain themselves in power (as part of the system's own mechanism of self-preservation and its principles of cohesion), or simply out of fear that they will be reproached for being 'clumsy' in handling the ritual. They have no other choice: because they cannot discard the rules of their own game, they can only attend more carefully to those rules. Not to react to challenges means to undermine their own excuse and lose control of their mutual communications system. To assume that the laws are a mere façade,

that they have no validity and that therefore it is pointless to appeal to them would mean to go on reinforcing those aspects of the law that create the façade and the ritual. It would mean confirming the law as an aspect of the world of appearances and enabling those who exploit it to rest easy with the cheapest (and therefore the most mendacious) form of their excuse.

I have frequently witnessed policemen, prosecutors or judges – if they were dealing with an experienced Chartist or a courageous lawyer, and if they were exposed to public attention (as individuals with a name, no longer protected by the anonymity of the apparatus) – suddenly and anxiously begin to take particular care that no cracks appear in the ritual. This does not alter the fact that a despotic power is hiding behind that ritual, but the very existence of the officials' anxiety necessarily regulates, limits and slows down the operation of that despotism.

This, of course, is not enough. But an essential part of the 'dissident' attitude is that it comes out of the reality of the human 'here and now'. It places more importance on oft-repeated and consistent concrete action – even though it may be inadequate and though it may ease only insignificantly the suffering of a single insignificant citizen – than it does in some abstract 'fundamental solution' in an uncertain future. In any case, is not this in fact just another form of 'small-scale work' in the Masarykian sense, with which the 'dissident' attitude seemed at first to be in such sharp contradiction?

This section would be incomplete without stressing certain internal limitations to the policy of 'taking them at their own word'. The point is this: even in the most ideal of cases, the law is only one of several imperfect and more or less external ways of defending what is better in life against what is worse. By itself, the law can never create anything better. Its purpose is to render a service and its meaning does not lie in the law itself. Establishing respect for the law does not automatically ensure a better life for that, after all, is a job for people and not for laws and institutions. It is possible to imagine a society with good laws that are fully respected but in which it is

impossible to live. Conversely, one can imagine life being quite bearable even where the laws are imperfect and imperfectly applied. The most important thing is always the quality of that life and whether or not the laws enhance life or repress it, not merely whether they are upheld or not. (Often strict observance of the law could have a disastrous impact on human dignity.) The key to a humane, dignified, rich and happy life does not lie either in the constitution or in the criminal code. These merely establish what may or may not be done and, thus, they can make life easier or more difficult. They limit or permit, they punish, tolerate or defend, but they can never give life substance or meaning. The struggle for what is called 'legality' must constantly keep this legality in perspective against the background of life as it really is. Without keeping one's eyes open to the real dimensions of life's beauty and misery, and without a moral relationship to life, this struggle will sooner or later come to grief on the rocks of some self-justifying system of scholastics. Without really wanting to, one would thus become more and more like the observer who comes to conclusions about our system only on the basis of trial documents and is satisfied if all the appropriate regulations have been observed.

XVIII

If the basic job of the 'dissident movements' is to serve truth, that is, to serve the real aims of life, and if that necessarily develops into a defence of the individual and his or her right to a free and truthful life (that is, a defence of human rights and a struggle to see the laws respected) then another stage of this approach, perhaps the most mature stage so far, is what Václav Benda has called the development of parallel structures.

When those who have decided to live within the truth have been denied any direct influence on the existing social structures, not to mention the opportunity to participate in them, and when these people begin to create what I have called the independent life of society, this independent life begins, of itself, to become structured in a certain way. Sometimes there are only very embryonic indications of this process of structuring; at other times, the structures are already quite well-developed. Their genesis and evolution are inseparable from the phenomenon of 'dissent', even though they reach far beyond the arbitrarily defined area of activity usually indicated by that term.

What are these structures? Ivan Jirous was the first in Czechoslovakia to formulate and apply in practice the concept of a 'second culture'. Although at first he was thinking chiefly of nonconformist rock music and only certain literary, artistic or performance events close to the sensibilities of those nonconformist musical groups, the term 'second culture' very rapidly came to be used for the whole area of independent and repressed culture, that is, not only for art and its various currents but also for the humanities, the social sciences and philosophical thought. This 'second culture', quite naturally, has created elementary organizational forms: *samizdat* editions of books and magazines, private performances and concerts, seminars, exhibitions and so on. (In Poland all of this is vastly more developed: there are independent

publishing houses and many more periodicals, even politieal periodicals; they have means of proliferation other than carbon copies, and so on. In the Soviet Union, *samizdat* has a longer tradition and clearly its forms are quite different.) Culture, therefore, is a sphere in which the 'parallel structures' can be observed in their most highly developed form. Benda, of course, gives thought to potential or embryonic forms of such structures in other spheres as well: from a parallel information network to parallel forms of education (private universities), parallel trade unions, parallel foreign contacts, to a kind of hypothesis on a parallel economy. On the basis of these parallel structures, he then develops the notion of a 'parallel *polis*' or state or, rather, he sees the rudiments of such a *polis* in these structures.

At a certain stage in its development, the independent life of society and the 'dissident movements' cannot avoid a certain amount of organization and institutionalization. This is a natural development and unless this independent life of society is somehow radically suppressed and eliminated, the tendency will grow. Along with it, a parallel political life will also necessarily evolve, and to a certain extent it exists already in Czechoslovakia. Various groupings of a more or less political nature will continue to define themselves politically, to act and confront each other.

These parallel structures, it may be said, represent the most articulated expressions so far of 'living within the truth'. One of the most important tasks the 'dissident movements' have set themselves is to support and develop them. Once again, it confirms the fact that all attempts by society to resist the pressure of the system have their essential beginnings in the pre-political area. For what else are parallel structures than an area where a different life can be lived, a life that is in harmony with its own aims and which in turn structures itself in harmony with those aims? What else are those initial attempts at social self-organization than the efforts of a certain part of society to live – as a society – within the truth, to rid itself of the self-sustaining aspects of totalitarianism and, thus, to

extricate itself radically from its involvement in the post-totalitarian system? What else is it but a non-violent attempt by people to negate the system within themselves and to establish their lives on a new basis, that of their own proper identity? And does this tendency not confirm once more the principle of returning the focus to actual individuals? After all, the parallel structures do not grow *a priori* out of a theoretical vision of systemic changes (there are no political sects involved), but from the aims of life and the authentic needs of real people. In fact, all eventual changes in the system, changes we may observe here in their rudimentary forms, have come about as it were *de facto*, from 'below', because life compelled them to, not because they came before life, somehow directing it or forcing some change on it.

Historical experience teaches us that any genuinely meaningful point of departure in an individual's life usually has an element of universality about it. In other words, it is not something partial, accessible only to a restricted community, and not transferable to any other. On the contrary, it must be potentially accessible to everyone; it must foreshadow a general solution and, thus, it is not just the expression of an introverted, self-contained responsibility that individuals have to and for themselves alone, but responsibility to and for the *world*. Thus it would be quite wrong to understand the parallel structures and the parallel *polis* as a retreat into a ghetto and as an act of isolation, addressing itself only to the welfare of those who had decided on such a course, and who are indifferent to the rest. It would be wrong, in short, to consider it an essentially group solution that has nothing to do with the general situation. Such a concept would, from the start, alienate the notion of living within the truth from its proper point of departure, which is concern for others, transforming it ultimately into just another more sophisticated version of 'living within a lie'. In doing so, of course, it would cease to be a genuine point of departure for individuals and groups and would recall the false notion of 'dissidents' as an exclusive group with exclusive interests, carrying on their own exclusive dialogue with the powers that be. In any case, even the

most highly developed forms of life in the parallel structures, even that most mature form of the parallel *polis* can only exist – at least in post-totalitarian circumstances – when the individual is at the same time lodged in the 'first', official structure by a thousand different relationships, even though it may only be the fact that one buys what one needs in their stores, uses their money and obeys their laws. Certainly one can imagine life in its 'baser' aspects flourishing in the parallel *polis*, but would not such a life, lived deliberately that way, as a programme, be merely another version of the schizophrenic life 'within a lie' which everyone else must live in one way or another? Would it not just be further evidence that a point of departure that is not a 'model' solution, that is not applicable to others, cannot be meaningful for an individual either? Patocka used to say that the most interesting thing about responsibility is that we carry it with us everywhere. That means that responsibility is ours, that we must accept it and grasp it *here*, *now*, in this place in time and space where the Lord has set us down, and that we cannot lie our way out of it by moving somewhere else, whether it be to an Indian ashram or to a parallel *polis*. If western young people so often discover that retreat to an Indian monastery fails them as an individual or group solution, then this is obviously because, and only because, it lacks that element of universality, since not everyone can retire to an ashram. Christianity is an example of an opposite way out: it is a point of departure for me here and now – but only because anyone, any where, at any time, may avail themselves of it.

In other words, the parallel *polis* points beyond itself and only makes sense as an act of deepening one's responsibility to and for the whole, as a way of discovering the most appropriate locus for this responsibility, not as an escape from it.

XIX

I have already talked about the political potential of living within the truth and of the limitations upon predicting whether, how and when a given expression of that life within the truth can lead to actual changes. I have also mentioned how irrelevant trying to calculate the risks in this regard are, for an essential feature of independent initiatives is that they are always, initially at least, an all or nothing gamble.

Nevertheless this outline of some of the work done by 'dissident movements' would be incomplete without considering, if only very generally, some of the different ways this work *might* actually affect society; in other words, about the ways that responsibility to and for the whole might (without necessarily meaning that it must) be realized in practice.

In the first place, it has to be emphasized that the whole sphere comprising the independent life of society and even more so the 'dissident movement' as such, is naturally far from being the only potential factor that might influence the history of countries living under the post-totalitarian system. The latent social crisis in such societies can at any time, independently of these movements, provoke a wide variety of political changes. It may unsettle the power structure and induce or accelerate various hidden confrontations, resulting in personnel, conceptual or at least 'climactic' changes. It may significantly influence the general atmosphere of life, evoke unexpected and unforeseen social unrest and explosions of discontent. Power shifts at the centre of the bloc can influence conditions in the different countries in various ways. Economic factors naturally have an important influence, as do broader trends of global civilization. An extremely important area, which could be a source of radical changes and political upsets, is represented by international politics, the policies adopted by the other superpower and all the other countries, the changing

structure of international interests and the positions taken by our bloc. Even the people who end up in the highest positions are not without significance, although as I have already said, one ought not to overestimate the importance of leading personalities in the post-totalitarian system. There are many such influences and combinations of influence, and the eventual political impact of the 'dissident movement' is thinkable only against this general background and in the context that background provides. That impact is only one of the many factors (and far from the most important one) that affect political developments, and it differs from the other factors perhaps only in that its essential focus is reflecting upon that political development from the point of view of a defence of people and seeking an immediate application of that reflection.

The primary purpose of the outward direction of these movements is always, as we have seen, to have an impact on society, not to affect the power structure, at least not directly and immediately. Independent initiatives address the hidden sphere; they demonstrate that living within the truth is a human and social alternative and they struggle to expand the space available for that life; they help – even though it is, of course, indirect help – to raise the confidence of citizens; they shatter the world of 'appearances' and unmask the real nature of power. They do not assume a messianic role; they are not a social 'avant-garde' or 'elite' that alone knows best, and whose task it is to 'raise the consciousness' of the 'unconscious' masses (that arrogant self-projection is, once again, intrinsic to an essentially different way of thinking, the kind that feels it has a patent on some 'ideal project' and therefore that it has the right to impose it on society). Nor do they want to lead anyone. They leave it up to each individual to decide what he or she will or will not take from their experience and work. (If official Czechoslovak propaganda described the Chartists as 'self-appointees', it was not in order to emphasize any real 'avant-garde' ambitions on their part, but rather a natural expression of how the regime thinks, its tendency to judge others according to itself, since behind any expression of criticism it automatically sees the desire to

cast the mighty from their seats and rule in their places 'in the name of the people', the same pretext the regime itself has used for years.)

These movements, therefore, always affect the power structure as such indirectly, as a part of society as a whole, for they are primarily addressing the hidden spheres of society, since it is not a matter of confronting the regime on the level of actual power.

I have already indicated one of the ways this can work: an awareness of the laws and the responsibility for seeing that they are upheld is indirectly strengthened. That, of course, is only a specific instance of a far broader influence, the indirect pressure felt from living within the truth: the pressure created by free thought, alternative values and 'alternative behaviour', and by independent social self-realization. The power structure, whether it wants to or not, must always react to this pressure to a certain extent. Its response, however, is always limited to two dimensions: repression and adaptation. Sometimes one dominates, sometimes the other. For example, the Polish 'Flying University' came under increased persecution and the 'flying teachers' were detained by the police. At the same time, however, professors in existing official universities tried to enrich their own curricula with several subjects hitherto considered taboo and this was a result of indirect pressure exerted by the 'Flying University'. The motives for this adaptation may vary from the 'ideal' (the hidden sphere has received the message and conscience and the will to truth are awakened) to the purely utilitarian: the regime's instinct for survival compels it to notice the changing ideas and the changing mental and social climate and react flexibly to them. Which of these motives happens to predominate in a given moment is not essential in terms of the final affect.

Adaptation is the positive dimension of the regime's response, and it can, and usually does, have a wide spectrum of forms and phases. Some circles may try to integrate values or people from the 'parallel world' into the official structures, to appropriate them, to become a little like them while trying to make them a little like themselves, and thus to adjust an obvious and untenable imbalance. In the 1960s,

progressive communists began to 'discover' certain unacknowledged cultural values and phenomena. This was a positive step, although not without its dangers, since the 'integrated' or 'appropriated' values lost something of their independence and originality, and having been given a cloak of officiality and conformity, their credibility was somewhat weakened. In a further phase, this adaptation can lead to various attempts on the part of the official structures to reform, both in terms of their ultimate goals and structurally. Such reforms are usually half-way measures; they are attempts to combine and realistically co-ordinate serving life and serving the post-totalitarian 'automatism'. But they cannot be otherwise. They muddy what was originally a clear demarcation line between living within the truth and living with a lie. They cast a smoke-screen over the situation, mystify society and make it difficult for people to keep their bearings. This, of course, does not alter the fact that it is always essentially good when it happens because it opens out new spaces. But it does make it more difficult to distinguish between 'admissible' and 'inadmissible' compromises.

Another – and higher – phase of adaptation is a process of internal differentiation that takes place in the official structures. These structures open themselves to more or less institutionalized forms of plurality because the real aims of life demand it. (One example: without changing the centralized and institutional basis of cultural life, new publishing houses, group periodicals, artists' groups, parallel research institutes and work places and so on, may appear under pressure from 'below'. Or another example: the single, monolithic youth organization run by the state as a typical post-totalitarian 'transmission belt' disintegrates under the pressure of real needs into a number of more or less independent organizations such as the Union of University Students, the Union of Secondary School Students, the Organization of Working Youth, and so on.) There is a direct relationship between this kind of differentiation, which allows initiatives from below to be felt, and the appearance and constitution of new structures which are already parallel, or rather independent, but which at the same time are respected, or at

least tolerated in varying degrees, by official institutions. These new institutions are more than just liberalized official structures adapted to the authentic needs of life; they are a direct expression of those needs, demanding a position in the context of what is already here. In other words, they are genuine expressions of the tendency of society to organize itself. (In Czechoslovakia in 1968 the best known organizations of this type were KAN, The Club of Committed Non-Communists, and K231, an organization of former political prisoners.)

The ultimate phase of this process is the situation in which the official structures – as agencies of the post-totalitarian system, existing only to serve its automatism and constructed in the spirit of that role – simply begin withering away and dying off, to be replaced by new structures that have evolved from 'below' and are put together in a fundamentally different way.

Certainly many other ways may be imagined in which the aims of life can bring about political transformations in the general organization of things and weaken on all levels the hold that techniques of manipulation have on society. Here I have mentioned only the way in which the general organization of things was in fact changed as we experienced it ourselves in Czechoslovakia around 1968. It must be added that all these concrete instances were part of a specific historical process which ought not be thought of as the only alternative, nor as necessarily repeatable (particularly not in our country), a fact which, of course, takes nothing away from the importance of the general lessons which are still sought and found in it to this day.

While on the subject of 1968 in Czechoslovakia, it may be appropriate to point to some of the characteristic aspects of developments at that time. All the transformations, first in the general 'mood', then conceptually and finally structurally, did not occur under pressure from the kind of parallel structures that are taking shape today. Such structures – which are sharply defined antitheses of the official structures – quite simply did not exist at

the time, nor were there any 'dissidents' in the present sense of the word. The changes that took place were simply a consequence of pressures of the most varied sort, some thorough-going, some partial. There were spontaneous attempts at freer forms of thinking, independent creation and political articulation. There were long-term, spontaneous and inconspicuous efforts to bring about the interpenetration of the independent life of society with the existing structures, usually beginning with the quiet institutionalization of this life on and around the periphery of the official structures. In other words, it was a gradual process of social awakening, a kind of 'creeping' process in which the hidden spheres gradually opened out. (There is some truth in the official propaganda which talks about a 'creeping counter-revolution' in Czechoslovakia, referring to how the aims of life proceed.) The motive force behind this awakening did not have to come exclusively from the independent life of society, considered as a definable social milieu (although of course it did come from there, a fact that has yet to be fully appreciated). It could also have simply come from the fact that people in the official structures who more or less identified with the official ideology came up against reality as it really was and as it gradually became clear to them through latent social crises and their own bitter experiences with the true nature and operations of power. (I am thinking here mainly of the many 'anti-dogmatic' reform communists who grew to become, over the years, a force inside the official structures.) Neither the proper conditions nor the *raison d'être* existed for those limited, 'self-structuring' independent initiatives familiar from the present era of 'dissident movements' that stand so sharply outside the official structures and are unrecognized by them *en bloc*. At that time, the post-totalitarian system in Czechoslovakia had not yet petrified into the static, sterile and stable forms that exist today, forms that compel people to fall back on their own organizing capabilities. For many historical and social reasons, the regime in 1968 was more open. The power structure, exhausted by Stalinist despotism and helplessly groping about for painless reform, was inevitably rotting from within, quite

incapable of offering any intelligent opposition to changes in the mood, to the way its younger members regarded things and to the thousands of authentic expressions of life on the 'pre-political' level that sprang up in that vast political terrain between the official and the unofficial.

From the more general point of view, yet another typical circumstance appears to be important: the social ferment that came to a head in 1968 never – in terms of actual structural changes – went any further than the reform, the differentiation or the replacement of structures that were really only of secondary importance. It did not affect the very essence of the power structure in the post-totalitarian system, which is to say its political model, the fundamental principles of social organization, not even the economic model in which all economic power is subordinated to political power. Nor were any essential structural changes made in the direct instruments of power (the army, the police, the judiciary, etc.). On that level, the issue was never more than a change in the mood, the personnel, the political line and, above all, changes in how that power was exercised. Everything else remained at the stage of discussion and planning. The two officially accepted programmes that went furthest in this regard were the April, 1968 Action Programme of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the proposal for economic reforms. The Action Programme – it could not have been otherwise – was full of contradictions and half-way measures that left the physical aspects of power untouched. And the economic proposals, while they went a long way to accommodate the aims of life in the economic sphere (they accepted such notions as a plurality of interests and intiatives, dynamic incentives, restrictions upon the economic command system), left untouched the basic pillar of economic power, that is, the principle of state, rather than genuine *social* ownership of the means of production. So there is a gap here which no social movement in the post-totalitarian system has ever been able to bridge, with the possible exception of those few days during the Hungarian uprising.

What other developmental alternative might emerge in the future? Replying to that question would mean entering the realm of pure speculation. For the time being, it can be said that the latent social crisis in the system has always (and there is no reason to believe it will not continue to do so) resulted in a variety of political and social disturbances (Germany in 1953, Hungary, the USSR and Poland in 1956, Czechoslovakia and Poland in 1968, and Poland in 1970 and 1976), all of them very different in their backgrounds, the course of their evolution and their final consequences. If we look at the enormous complex of different factors that led to such disturbances, and at the impossibility of predicting what accidental accumulation of events will cause that fermentation in the hidden sphere to break through to the light of day (the problem 'of the final straw'); and if we consider how impossible it is to guess what the future holds, given such opposing trends as, on the one hand, the increasingly profound integration of the 'bloc' and the expansion of power within it, and on the other hand the prospects of the USSR disintegrating under pressure from awakening national consciousness in the non-Russian areas (in this regard the Soviet Union cannot expect to remain forever free of the world-wide struggle for national liberation), then we must see the haplessness of trying to make long-range predictions.

In any case, I do not believe that this type of speculation has any immediate significance for the 'dissident movements' since these movements, after all, do not develop from speculative thinking, and so to establish themselves on that basis would mean alienating themselves from the very source of their identity.

As far as prospects for the 'dissident movements' as such go, there seems to be very little likelihood that future developments will lead to a lasting coexistence of two isolated, mutually non-interacting and mutually indifferent bodies – the main polis and the parallel polis. As long as it remains what it is, the practice of living within the truth cannot fail to be a threat to the system. It is quite impossible to imagine it continuing to coexist with the practice of living within a

lie without dramatic tension. The relationship of the post-totalitarian system – as long as it remains what it is – and the independent life of society – as long as it remains the locus of a renewed responsibility for the whole and to the whole – will always be one of either latent or open conflict.

In this situation there are only two possibilities: either the post-totalitarian system will go on developing (that is, will be *able* to go on developing), thus inevitably coming closer to some dreadful Orwellian vision of a world of absolute manipulation, while all the more articulate expressions of living within the truth are definitively snuffed out; or the independent life of society (the parallel *polis*), including the 'dissident movements', will slowly but surely become a social phenomenon of growing importance, taking a real part in the life of society with increasing clarity and influencing the general situation. Of course this will always be only one of many factors influencing the situation and it will operate rather in the background, in concert with the other factors and in a way appropriate to the background.

Whether it ought to focus on reforming the official structures or on encouraging differentiation, or on replacing them with new structures, whether the intent is to 'ameliorate' the system or, on the contrary, to tear it down: these and similar questions, in so far as they are not pseudo-problems, can be posed by the 'dissident movement' only within the context of a particular situation, when the movement is faced with a concrete task. In other words, it must pose questions, as it were, *ad hoc*, out of a concrete consideration of the authentic needs of life. To reply to such questions abstractly and to formulate a political programme in terms of some hypothetical future would mean, I believe, a return to the spirit and methods of traditional politics, and this would limit and alienate the work of 'dissent' where it is most instrinsically itself and has the most genuine prospects for the future. I have already emphasized several times that these 'dissident movements' do not have their point of departure in the invention of systemic changes but in a real,

everyday struggle for a better life 'here and now'. The political and structural systems that life discovers for itself will clearly always be – for some time to come, at least – limited, half-way, unsatisfying and polluted by debilitating tactics. It cannot be otherwise, and we must expect this and not be demoralized by it. It is of great importance that the main thing – the everyday, thankless and never-ending struggle of human beings to live more freely, truthfully and in quiet dignity – never imposes any limits on itself, never be half-hearted, inconsistent, never trap itself in political tactics, speculating on the outcome of its actions or entertaining fantasies about the future. The purity of this struggle is the best guarantee of optimum results when it comes to actual interaction with the post-totalitarian structures.

XX

The specific nature of post-totalitarian conditions – with their absence of a normal political life and the fact that any far-reaching political change is utterly unforeseeable – has one positive aspect: it compels us to examine our situation in terms of its deeper coherences and to consider our future in the context of global, long-range prospects of the world of which we are a part. The fact that the most intrinsic and fundamental confrontation between human beings and the system takes place at a level incomparably more profound than that of traditional politics would seem, at the same time, to determine as well the direction such considerations will take.

Our attention, therefore, inevitably turns to the most essential matter: the crisis of contemporary technological society as a whole, the crisis that Heidegger describes as the ineptitude of humanity face to face with the planetary power of technology. Technology – that child of modern science, which in turn is a child of modern metaphysics – is out of humanity's control, has ceased to serve us, has enslaved us and compelled us to participate in the preparation of our own destruction. And humanity can find no way out: we have no idea and no faith, and even less do we have a political conception to help us bring things back under human control. We look on helplessly as that coldly functioning machine we have created inevitably engulfs us, tearing us away from our natural affiliations (for instance from our habitat in the widest sense of that word, including our habitat in the biosphere) just as it removes us from the experience of 'being' and casts us into the world of 'existences'. This situation has already been described from many different angles and many individuals and social groups have sought, often painfully, to find ways out of it (for instance through oriental thought or by forming communes). The only social, or rather political, attempt to do something about it that contains the necessary element of

universality (responsibility to and for the whole) is the desperate and, given the turmoil the world is in, fading voice of the ecological movement, and even there the attempt is limited to a particular notion of how to use technology to oppose the dictatorship of technology.

'Only a God can save us now,' Heidegger says, and he emphasizes the necessity of 'a different way of thinking', that is, of a departure from what philosophy has been for centuries, and a radical change in the way in which humanity understands itself, the world and its position in it. He knows no way out and all he can recommend is 'preparing expectations'.

Various thinkers and movements feel that this as yet unknown way out might be most generally characterized as a broad 'existential revolution'. I share this view, and I also share the opinion that a solution cannot be sought in some technological sleight of hand, that is, in some external proposal for change, or in a revolution that is merely philosophical, merely social, merely technological or even merely political. These are all areas where the consequences of an 'existential revolution' can and must be felt; but their most intrinsic locus can only be human existence in the profoundest sense of the word. It is only from that basis that it can become a generally ethical – and, of course, ultimately a political – reconstitution of society.

What we call the consumer and industrial (or post-industrial) society, and Ortea y Gasset once understood as 'the revolt of the masses', as well as the intellectual, moral, political and social misery in the world today: all of this is perhaps merely an aspect of the deep crisis in which humanity, dragged helplessly along by the automatism of global technological civilization, finds itself.

The post-totalitarian system is only one aspect – a particularly drastic aspect and thus all the more revealing of its real origins – of this general inability of modern humanity to be the master of its own situation. The automatism of the post-totalitarian system is merely an extreme version of the global automatism of technological

civilization. The human failure that it mirrors is only one variant of the general failure of modern humanity.

This planetary challenge to the position of human beings in the world is, of course, also taking place in the western world, the only difference being the social and political forms it takes. Heidegger refers expressly to a crisis of democracy. There is no real evidence that western democracy, that is, democracy of the traditional parliamentary type, can offer solutions that are any more profound. It may even be said that the more room there is in the western democracies (compared to our world) for the genuine aims of life, the better the crisis is hidden from people and the more deeply do they become immersed in it.

It would appear that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilization and the industrial-consumer society, for they, too, are being dragged helplessly along by it. People are manipulated in ways that are infinitely more subtle and refined than the brutal methods used in the post-totalitarian societies. But this static complex of rigid, conceptually sloppy and politically pragmatic mass political parties run by professional apparatuses and releasing the citizen from all forms of concrete and personal responsibility; and those complex foci of capital accumulation engaged in secret manipulations and expansion; the omnipresent dictatorship of consumption, production, advertising, commerce, consumer culture, and all that flood of information: all of it, so often analysed and described, can only with great difficulty be imagined as the source of humanity's rediscovery of itself. In his June 1978 Harvard lecture,fn1 Solzhenitsyn describes the illusory nature of freedoms not based on personal responsibility and the chronic inability of the traditional democracies, as a result, to oppose violence and totalitarianism. In a democracy, human beings may enjoy many personal freedoms and securities that are unknown to us, but in the end they do them no good, for they too are ultimately victims of the same automatism, and are incapable of defending their concerns

about their own identity or preventing their superficialization or transcending concerns about their own personal survival to become proud and responsible members of the *polis*, making a genuine contribution to the creation of its destiny.

Because all our prospects for a significant change for the better are very long range indeed, we are obliged to take note of this deep crisis of traditional democracy. Certainly, if conditions were to be created for democracy in some countries in the Soviet bloc (although this is becoming increasingly improbable), it might be an appropriate transitional solution that would help to restore the devastated sense of civic awareness, to renew democratic discussion, to allow for the crystallization of an elementary political plurality, an essential expression of the aims of life. But to cling to the notion of traditional parliamentary democracy as one's political ideal and to succumb to the illusion that only this 'tried and true' form is capable of guaranteeing human beings enduring dignity and an independent role in society would, in my opinion, be at the very least short-sighted.

I see a renewed focus of politics on real people as something far more profound than merely returning to the everyday mechanisms of western (or if you like bourgeois) democracy. In 1968 I felt that our problem could be solved by forming an opposition party that would compete publicly for power with the Communist Party. I have long since come to realize, however, that it is just not that simple and that no opposition party in and of itself, just as no new electoral laws in and of themselves, could make society proof against some new form of violence. No 'dry' organizational measures in themselves can provide that guarantee, and we would be hard pressed to find in them that God who alone can save us.

XXI

And now I may properly be asked the question: What is to be done, then?

My scepticism towards alternative political models and the ability of systemic reforms or changes to redeem us does not, of course, mean that I am sceptical of political thought altogether. Nor does my emphasis on the importance of focusing concern on real human beings disqualify me from considering the possible structural consequences flowing from it. On the contrary, if A was said, then B should be said as well. Nevertheless, I will offer only a few very general remarks.

Above all, any existential revolution should provide hope of a moral reconstitution of society, which means a radical renewal of the relationship of human beings to what I have called the 'human order', which no political order can replace. A new experience of being, a renewed rootedness in the universe, a newly grasped sense of 'higher responsibility', a new-found inner relationship to other people and to the human community – these factors clearly indicate the direction in which we must go.

And the political consequences? Most probably they could be reflected in the constitution of structures that will derive from this 'new spirit', from human factors rather than from a particular formalization of political relationships and guarantees. In other words, the issue is the rehabilitation of values like trust, openness, responsibility, solidarity, love. I believe in structures that are not aimed at the 'technical' aspect of the execution of power, but at the significance of that execution in structures held together more by a commonly shared feeling of the importance of certain communities than by commonly shared expansionist ambitions directed 'outward'. There can and must be structures that are open, dynamic and small; beyond a certain point, human ties like personal trust and personal responsibility cannot work. There must be structures that in

principle place no limits on the genesis of different structures. Any accumulation of power whatsoever (one of the characteristics of automatism) should be profoundly alien to it. They would be structures not in the sense of organizations or institutions, but like a community. Their authority certainly cannot be based on long-empty traditions, like the tradition of mass political parties, but rather on how, in concrete terms, they enter into a given situation. Rather than a strategic agglomeration of formalized organizations, it is better to have organizations springing up *ad hoc*, infused with enthusiasm for a particular purpose and disappearing when that purpose has been achieved. The leaders' authority ought to derive from their personalities and be personally tested in their particular surroundings, and not from their position in any *nomenklatura*. They should enjoy great personal confidence and even great law-making powers based on that confidence. This would appear to be the only way out of the classic impotence of traditional democratic organizations, which frequently seem founded more on mistrust than mutual confidence, and more on collective irresponsibility than on responsibility. It is only with the full existential backing of every member of the community that a permanent bulwark against 'creeping totalitarianism' can be established. These structures should naturally arise from *below* as a consequence of authentic social 'self-organization'; they should derive vital energy from·a living dialogue with the genuine needs from which they arise, and when these needs are gone, the structures should also disappear. The principles of their internal organization should be very diverse, with a minimum of external regulation. The decisive criterion of this 'self-constitution' should be the structure's actual significance, and not just a mere abstract norm.

Both political and economic life ought to be founded on the varied and versatile co-operation of such dynamically appearing and disappearing organizations. As far as the economic life of society goes, I believe in the principle of self-management, which is probably the only way of achieving what all the theorists of socialism have dreamed about, that is, the genuine (i.e. informal) participation

of workers in economic decision-making, leading to a feeling of genuine responsibility for their collective work. The principles of control and discipline ought to be abandoned in favour of self-control and self-discipline.

As is perhaps clear from even so general an outline, the systemic consequences of an ‘existential revolution’ of this type goes significantly beyond the framework of classical parliamentary democracy. Having introduced the term ‘post-totalitarian’ for the purposes of this discussion, perhaps I should refer to the notion I have just outlined – purely for the moment – as the prospects for a ‘post-democratic’ system.

Undoubtedly this notion could be developed further, but I think it would be a foolish undertaking, to say the least, because slowly but surely the whole idea would become alienated, separated from itself. After all, the essence of such a ‘post-democracy’ is also that it can only develop *via facti*, as a process deriving directly *from life*, from a new atmosphere and a new ‘spirit’ (political thought, of course, would play a role here, though not as a director, merely as a guide). It would be presumptuous, however, to try to foresee the structural expressions of this ‘new spirit’ without that spirit actually being present and without knowing its concrete physiognomy.

XXII

I would probably have omitted the entire preceding section as a more suitable subject for private meditation were it not for a certain recurring sensation. It may seem rather presumptuous, and therefore I will present it as a question: Does not this vision of 'post-democratic' structures in some ways remind one of the 'dissident' groups or some of the independent citizens' initiatives as we already know them from our own surroundings? Do not these small communities, bound together by thousands of shared tribulations, give rise to some of those special 'humanly meaningful' political relationships and ties that we have been talking about? Are not these communities (and they *are* communities more than organizations) – motivated mainly by a common belief in the profound significance of what they are doing since they have no chance of direct, external success – joined together by precisely the kind of atmosphere in which the formalized and ritualized ties common in the official structures are supplanted by a living sense of solidarity and fraternity? Do not these 'post-democratic' relationships of immediate personal trust and the informal rights of individuals based on them come out of the background of all those commonly shared difficulties? Do not these groups emerge, live and disappear under pressure from concrete and authentic needs, unburdened by the ballast of hollow traditions? Is not their attempt to create an articulate form of 'living within the truth' and to renew the feeling of higher responsibility in an apathetic society really a sign of some kind of rudimentary moral reconstitution?

In other words, are not these informal, non-bureaucratic, dynamic and open communities that comprise the 'parallel *polis*' a kind of rudimentary prefiguration, a symbolic model of those more meaningful 'post-democratic' political structures that might become the foundation of a better society?

I know from thousands of personal experiences how the mere circumstance of having signed Charter 77 has immediately created a deeper and more open relationship and evoked sudden and powerful feelings of genuine community among people who were all but strangers before. This kind of thing happens only rarely, if at all, even among people who have worked together for long periods in some apathetic official structure. It is as though the mere awareness and acceptance of a common task and a shared experience were enough to transform people and the climate of their lives, as though it gave their public work a more human dimension that is seldom found elsewhere.

Perhaps all this is only the consequence of a common threat. Perhaps the moment the threat ends or eases, the mood it helped create will begin to dissipate as well. (The aim of those who threaten us, however, is precisely the opposite. Again and again, one is shocked by the energy they devote to contaminating, in various despicable ways, all the human relationships inside the threatened community.)

Yet even if that were so, it would change nothing in the question I have posed.

We do not know the way out of the marasmus of the world, and it would be an expression of unforgivable pride were we to see the little we do as a fundamental solution, or were we to present ourselves, our community and our solutions to vital problems as the only thing worth doing.

Even so, I think that given all these preceding thoughts on post-totalitarian conditions, and given the circumstances and the inner constitution of the developing efforts to defend human beings and their identity in such conditions, the questions I have posed are appropriate. If nothing else, they are an invitation to reflect concretely on our own experience and to give some thought to whether certain elements of that experience do not – without our really being aware of it – point somewhere further, beyond their

apparent limits, and whether right here, in our everyday lives, certain challenges are not already encoded, quietly waiting for the moment when they will be read and grasped.

For the real question is whether the ‘brighter future’ is really always so distant. What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness has prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?